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THE ROMANCE
OF A RITUALIST
by VINCENT BROWN



**THE
ROMANCE OF A RITUALIST**



**THE
ROMANCE OF A RITUALIST**





**THE
ROMANCE OF A RITUALIST**

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

MY BROTHER.

ORDEAL BY COMPASSION.

TWO IN CAPTIVITY.

[In preparation.]



THE ROMANCE OF RITUALIST

BY

VINCENT BROWN

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LONDON AND NEW YORK
1898**

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THE ROMANCE OF A RITUALI

I

ARTHUR HAIG walked over the hills Drum. The beautiful old place, in a sing wonderment of late sunshine, surpr affection within him. Mrs. Asgar (a serv said) was in the garden ; and Haig set fo to seek her.

He strolled this way and that, as one ease. For indeed it was good to be h where the world seemed to stand still peace with itself, and earth and air were lu in the content of humble pleasant things.

He came upon Asgar's mother in a q corner, among flowers of ancient simplici

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She was on her knees in a w
leaning towards a flower over the
a pathetic little figure in faded t
a light gray woollen shawl over he
a black lace cap on her white
was very pale, but that was how
pected to find her, how through t
had borne her in affectionate rem

He wondered—with a touch o
—to see her kneeling. He f
would have gone back. But sh
eyes and smiled, and uttered his
way that made him happy an
think he had not quite passed
memory.

He advanced, and held out h
help her to rise; but she said,
not so feeble as that," and leav
walking-stick, so stood up, gi
regardful welcome.

And then, saying, "I must l

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look at you," she put on her gold-rimmed eye-glasses ; and Haig laughed and blushed like a big boy under the gracious countenance of her scrutiny. For the fun of the exercise, she did not look at him through her glasses, but over them, making him look of a child playing at being old.

He dusted a withered leaf from her hand. "I was watching a bee on the foxglove," she said. "I daresay you wise people——" She stopped, and removed the stick from one hand to the other. "I was about to say something ungenerous." Her hand (she wore white lace mittens) moved in a kind of benediction over the flower. "But I will only say, I don't think that restless young people ever see anything more wonderful than that."

"You mean the flowers, Mrs. Asgar?" "The flowers and the bees," she said. And this was Asgar's mother!

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She led Haig to a seat under an old wall over which showers of white and red roses fell, and made him sit there beside her, and asked him his age *now*, and what he had been doing with his life, and why he had so seldom written to her (he had not written for two years : but she was merciful), and how his sister was ; and when he had last been to see his dear mother's grave.

And every now and then, in her gentle questioning and still more gentle chiding, she put up her eye-glasses to look at him, and always looked at him over them.

And then she made him stand up before her, and said, How tall he was grown ; and what a shrivelled little woman he made her feel, expanding his chest there like a gallant soldier, between her and the sun—as if she had not as much right to the sun as he, for all his proud looks !

And then (regarding him whimsically) : “ I

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suppose you forget when I boxed your ears,
because—”

And now on a sudden Haig's martial pose collapsed, and he cried, “Don't say it, Mrs. Asgar!”—and his laughter rang upon the garden. And the red and white roses seemed to know all about it; and he plucked one, a spotless white, and put it in Mrs. Asgar's breast.

He confessed remembrance of that box on the ear: only it didn't hurt in the least, though he was horribly indignant at the outrage on his feelings; and next day he had a battle royal with Edward, and both their noses ran oceans of blood; and then they stole things from the stables, and made an amazing raft and got nearly drowned in the river, and enjoyed themselves hugely—and had been the best of friends ever since.



II

BUT now Asgar's mother fell on a sad thoughtfulness.

"I am afraid," she said, "you will not be so cheerful at Drum this time."

"Is Edward at home?" Haig asked uneasily.

"Yes, he is at home. And yet—not at home."

She touched a ripened weed with her walking-stick.

"The wind will come," she said, and was silent a moment. "The wind will come, and the pollen will be driven away. When I see it, flitting hither and thither—the creature of chance—I cannot help thinking of certain human lives."



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Haig, understanding her parable, cheerily, "But the pollen may at last on fruitful soil."

"At last!" she murmured.

"Ah," he cried, "the great mother surely take care of it. And if she doesn't—well, of course there's nothing else to be done, and it will have to take luck."

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"Mr. Haig, Mr. Haig! in our highest in our outlook upon the eternal verities for there are such things, you know—terrible danger and weakness, this relies on 'pot-luck.' It must be wrong, indeed there is such a thing as moral order. It is kind of you to speak so, to give me hope. And I am not hopeless. Oh no; we make allowances for Edward, knowing how dull and old-fashioned we are at Drum. He has grown away from us, and if I believe that he had grown into a lostie

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calmer wisdom than the old ways . . . I must tell you, he is so unhappy, and the spirit of unrest seems to have taken hold of him. He isolates himself; and that is not a good sign. If only he would trust me, make a friend of me! But we are almost as strangers to one another now."

Mrs. Asgar was silent awhile. Then she said in a low, remote voice—

"It is as though something had happened that had made Edward cease to be my son. We move as it were in different worlds. I cannot comprehend our estrangement. But I must not complain; there is so much to make one grateful, even amid the sad accidents of life."

"He is in good health, I hope?"

"He does not look well. I am very, very pleased you have come, and I trust you will stay as long as you can—if only for Edward's sake."



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"Has he given up those—those ideas used to have?"

She touched Haig's arm.

"You were going to say, wild ideas, you not?"

"Yes, Mrs. Asgar."

She sighed. "One after another has to have gone. I did think that his connection with the Church of the Annunciation at Imberminster would be permanent. But he left Mr. Strauss—he is called Father Sylvester—and took up with a Brotherhood, of which you may have heard."

"Yes," said Haig. "Some of them are themselves rather notorious. The people chortled. People are generally ready to have a sneer for any new religious movement. Has the Brotherhood been disbanded?"

"I cannot say. Edward has given up the church, but I think that Mr. Sylvester and Denis are still trying to carry it on."



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began it as a protest against Christian apathy in these days."

"They will find a good deal of that to protest against," Haig said. "The Brothers were all extreme Ritualists, weren't they?"

"That is so, I believe. The Church of the Annunciation, with the work of which Edward identified himself for a considerable time, is one of the churches which people talk about."

"I have seen attacks on Father Strauss," said Haig. "He wants, as I understand, to restore in the English Church everything but the temporal Papal supremacy. Does he come to Drum?"

"He has not been here," Mrs. Asgar replied. "I mistrust him—I cannot help it; I like the simple old Evangelical truth, and plainness in public worship; but if I thought that Father Strauss's presence at Drum would have a quieting effect on Edward,

[REDACTED]

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I would invite him to pay us a visit—though I don't know what our rector would say."

"He is Low Church?"

"Oh yes; we are all Low Church people at Drum."

"I suppose Edward and the rector have fierce theological battles?"

"No, no; my son does not discuss these matters with us. When he was staying in the Annunciation clergy-house at Imberminster I called one morning to see him. That was my only visit to him there; I should not have cared to go again. It happened to be a saint's day, and, to please him, I attended the service in the church. Mr. Haig, it was not at all like the Church of England as I have been brought up to understand it from childhood."

"Very gorgeous ritual, I suppose?"

"Oh, I could not follow it in the least. At first I really thought the service was in

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Latin. No doubt the ritual was beautiful to the eye ; I shall never forget it. But I could not feel at all at home, as I do in our dear old church at Drum. When every one suddenly knelt at certain words in the Nicene Creed, and I was left standing alone, I felt quite confused and nervous, as though I had no right to be there. It was all so mysterious ; I was glad to get away. Our rector tells me there is really no difference between a High Celebration at the Church of the Annunciation and High Mass in the Roman Catholic Church."

"The Ritualists, I believe, frankly admit that," said Haig. "They are honest enough."

"Do you—I am glad you think so," Mrs. Asgar said meekly.

"So far, at least," Haig added.

"The clergyman who gave out the notices," said Mrs. Asgar, "spoke, not of the Holy Communion, as Mr. Tarpath does,



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but of Low Mass and High Mass. And there was a stoup of holy water at the door, and the people dipped their fingers in it and crossed themselves. I could smell the incense for days after. Mr. Tarpeth says they say the Roman Catholic prayer to the Blessed Virgin."

"What made Edward join them?"

"I cannot say. He has always been inclined that way. He worked very hard at the Annunciation, throwing in his lot completely with them and doing everything a layman can do. You know how enthusiastic he is."

Presently—"Why did he break with them?" Haig inquired.

"Because—I have heard—of his insisting on joining the Brotherhood. And now that too has failed him. It must have been a great blow to him; he has believed in so many ideals. . . . I hope, Mr. Haig, you

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will be able to comfort him. How lonely Drum has been since he came! Indeed it did not seem so lonely during his long absence, because I could then think of him as still belonging to me. Now—you know, he has shut himself up in the Deaf Tower."

"Why should he do that?"

"He gives no reason. He is terribly changed. If he were standing here I should—almost—feel in truer sympathy with you than with him. I may see nothing of him for days and days; and sometimes he is not at the tower, and no one knows where he is."

A young man, a gardener, carrying a spade over his shoulder, passed along by the wall, and Mrs. Asgar spoke to him gently.

"That is Luke," she said, her eyes following him.

"He appears depressed," Haig observed.

"Yes. It is very strange."

She rose.

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" Let us walk through the fruit gard
like to see the sun go down over the
One is comforted by the knowledge t
will rise again."

Haig offered her his arm : but, No,
you, she must not encourage herself ir
ness (she said). And then, delicatel
reminded her of the words she had
—“very strange.”

" Yes : the disappearance of Bessie
hurst. Of course you cannot have l
She was poor Luke's sweetheart ; at
he so regarded her. Well, she sud
disappeared from Drum without say
word to any one, or leaving the sli
message as to where she had gone."

" There was another lover in the
perhaps ? " Haig suggested.

" If so, no one ever heard of him
scarcely think there could have been.
little secrets are soon known here."

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"Was she rather flighty?"

"Oh no! quite otherwise: a thoroughly self-respecting, modest, good girl. sensible too, and well educated, even refined, for her station in life. I had most implicit confidence in her, and indeed have still, in spite of the strangeness of her conduct. Her mother, who is a widow, is deeply distressed, and we have to be constantly encouraging Luke, or he would give way altogether. I pity him very much; he seems to be the only person at whom Edward takes any interest.
fine type," said Mrs. Asgar meditatively. "I have known him since he was a child, and honour him. He is indeed affectionate, and would not harm

She stopped: shaded her eyes with her hand.

"How quickly the dusk comes! See how that a light in the Deaf Tower

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"I fancied," said Haig, "I saw a light there. But the tower is in darkness now."

They stood looking towards the park in silence.

"Has nothing," Haig asked, "been heard of the girl Bessie since she went away?"

"Nothing at all. And we have done everything we possibly could do in the matter. It is a very remarkable case of personal obliteration, so to say; and many of our people—who are very superstitious—appear to have convinced themselves that she has been 'spirited away' by some evil power. Owing to the complete mystery of it one can almost excuse them."

"Now there is a light in the Deaf Tower," said Haig—"near the top."

"Yes; I can see it. But what can Edward be doing up there? I understood that he confined himself to the lower part, which is

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habitable. Mr. Haig, you will
way into the park just down the

"I will see you indoors first, >

"No—no, thank you! I am
alone in the late evening. Pl
Edward at once. And will you
persuade him to come back for
dinner?"

III

(*Sylvester writes to Denis from Imberminster*)

. . . YES, he has forsaken the Brotherhood, and I know not where he may be. I cannot think he would go to Drum: he would be more likely to seek refuge in a great city. He will go to and fro on the earth crying, "Peace, peace," and there will be no peace for him till he walks again in the only true way. All seems lost: I am tempted, in the sorrow and wonder in which he has thrown me, to despair of him almost; but indeed we must not give up hope, dear Denis.

Of his most lamentable apostasy I am unable fully to tell you. I cannot understand it, his sudden failure when we

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thought he was so wholly with dreadful confusion of darkness and which he broke from us.

It happened on the third night a trembling fear of him, when, as I ha you, I held my breath in appre amazement as he knelt—not in pra under the spell of a great temptat temptation of a beauteous face.

The room was full of people, though in the afternoon, when we serious talk and I began to susp he said he would take no part i night, but would be at the door ; y last moment he declared his int speak, and asked me to let him on the platform. In his excited remembering how his imaginati yond his control and makes seemly things, I tried to pers silence ; but you know how self-



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how imperious sometimes. Even when he insisted on having the lights turned low down I scarcely opposed his wish, fearing to intensify his nervous distemper.

Denis, you must not call him Judas again ; I think the reproach harsh and unjust, and unworthy of you. I am sure he is not so in intention at least, and it is more charitable to regard his lapse as temporary. Yet, as I stood by the door gazing at him on the platform, in the dim light in which he looked so unreal, the shadow of his better self, it did seem to me (I say this with reluctance) that he personified that terrible power, everywhere awaking in these days, which compels men in the same moment to believe and doubt, to praise and blaspheme. I do not know, but I think it is the spirit of compromise in the spiritual world. And he could never be happy with *that*.

He began quietly, and with faithfulness.

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Then the words occurred to him, "Who can tell a man what shall be after him under the sun?" and in a loud voice he kept calling the words out as if they had come to have an awful meaning for him. And then, growing more and more agitated, he appeared to be making of himself spiritual shipwreck.

It is impossible for me to send you his actual address ; the blurred whole I can still realise with consternation and shame as I write, but not distinctly a single phras. The spectacle he presented was that c man in a great perplexity on finding self in the starless darkness outside t —a man who was the wrecker of soul and yet in the strange arr^c the human will was trying to for from Heaven.

His vehement outburst, his plings with himself in the dark, f



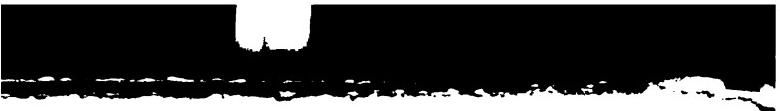
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people; women crept away; an old clergyman glanced at me reproachfully as I opened the door to let him out, and whispered, "I suppose this is the new religion, in which God is arraigned in His own house—" Many nevertheless remained, fascinated by his passionate eloquence and the personal magnetism which is so alluring at times. Others, I could tell, were inexpressibly shocked and grieved. A young man sitting near the door leaned forward and covered his face with his hands.

I do not care to go on; I must be short, or I may forget charity.

I need not remind you how strong he is physically; and he continued in this way till he seemed exhausted. He became then once more, in his weakness, the man as we have known him and would wish him always to be.

His final words were uttered in humility



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and contrition, and were beautiful in expression. I could barely see him on the platform at the end for my tears.

When the people were gone he was very depressed, and begged me to leave him. . . .

IV

THE Deaf Tower stood on a low bland hill in the deer park. Woods curved round it from north-west to east. It stood isolate, half-a-mile perhaps from the house.

The tower was like a thing that had happened long ago and had become an integral part of its surroundings. Haig did not take kindly to the grotesque. Yet he fancied this gray-black, lonesome, solemn piece of stonework as being coeval with the trees which were its frame, and he could even imagine its changing with the seasons, as though it had been claimed as part and parcel of nature: yet never perceptibly growing old.

In height it must have been some forty

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feet, and its "ears" were simply immense gargoyle. The upper part was said to be haunted. You may hear queer stories at Drum.

A dynasty of gamekeepers had inhabited the lower part, till Asgar's father, a man of shuddering religious melancholy, had stopped the preservation of game and even the prosecution of poachers. His method had been to have the sinners before him, in the darkened room where in his ending days he nearly always hid himself, read to them (with sighs and moans) the Ten Commandments and selections from the Commination Service, present them with Bibles, give them his blessing, and let them go.

And it came to pass, when a distinguished poacher died, full of years and honours, that sixteen Bibles and a heap of tracts on mournful themes were dragged out from



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under his bed—which things the rector impounded for use among his people, so that a good man's works should live after him.

You got to the top of the tower—or rather you were supposed to be able to get there—by just such a stair as you may find in mediæval cathedrals: that is to say, it gave you the creepy notion, not that you were ascending into the air, but that you were being screwed away into outer darkness. Bats and owls and other degenerate creatures held the Deaf Tower in respect and affection, but decent birds would have nothing to do with it beyond a hop and a skip on their way from wood to wood.

There was only one door, and Haig finding this shut, knocked. The light above had disappeared: everything was silent and still, and a little awesome.

Haig, thinking he heard voices, listened.

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A dog barked, and a bat flew round the tower.

Haig gave the door a thump with his fist, and shouted, "Hullo, hullo!"

"Well!" a voice said from within, "who's there?"

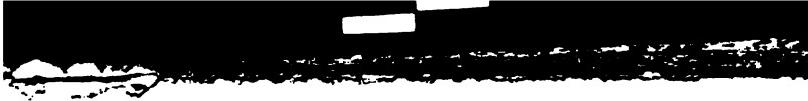
"Come on, Asgar: open this blessed door!" Haig called.

It was opened, and Haig went in, noticing that Asgar locked it again.

"What are you doing in this confounded place?"

"Try this chair," said Asgar.

"I will presently. It seems a pretty cosy hole after all. But you're a selfish brute, Asgar, for leaving your mother. One, two, three, four, five — why, you must have a dozen wax candles burning here, and all in silver candlesticks! Somebody must have been getting married; Joan had twenty-four last spring, and she's circulated three of



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of them already. And what's this?" cried Haig, standing before a picture over the mantelshelf, three huge candles burning on either side of it.

"The Perfect Woman," said Asgar.

He stooped and ruffled some dry mud off the bottom of his trousers.

"The Perfect Womam should be a photograph," said Haig. "This isn't. It's made up—an ideal. And a man can't make an ideal the mother of his children. It wouldn't be decent!"

He turned to Asgar.

"And what have you been doing with yourself all these years? I hear you've given up that absurd Brotherhood."

"I have given up a good many things, Haig."

"Women included? —— Ssh!" Haig whispered. "What was that?"

"I only heard your voice. There is

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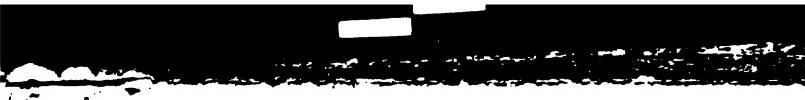
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no one here. We two are alone in the tower."

Why (Haig asked himself) had he said that? The question had not been put to him ; the words—surely—had been prompted by fear of discovery.

And he had locked the door.

"You've always been a queer sort of chap. You know that as well as anybody ; I've a notion you used to be conceited about your queerness—yet it has seemed natural enough as a rule. Oh, I've had my eye on you. But what strikes me as being downright unnatural and ridiculous and senseless—and cruel ; I must say it!—is your shutting yourself up here in this unholy den. What's your object? What do you get by it? Who is being benefited, or made happier—or protected?"



V

ASGAR looked at his friend. He was a man, it seemed to Haig, who had got himself into some sort of tight corner and was unable to get out of it—did not, indeed, quite understand how he came to be there.

Haig recalled what his mother had said about him; his weariness, his tired outlook. It was true. But there was something behind, something eager, restless, profound even, that defied interpretation. It must be very human, Haig felt, whatever it was; and he wondered too, in a shudder of dread and pain, if it were curable.

And what part, in the mystery of this life seemingly so perplexing to itself, was filled by the girl who had been lost? “Dear



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old Drum is on the brink of a catastrophe," Haig said to himself; and from sheer horror of the tragic silence he spoke flippantly.

"I hope you haven't fallen into the eternal sigh, old chap. What's the good of being glum? A man may attach too much importance to the importance of his own cock-sparrow existence. I see you've scribbled at the bottom of this picture, 'When night has once passed into a human soul it never leaves it, though the stars may rise'—and at the feet of the Perfect Woman too! I beg your pardon; I see she hasn't got any feet; I daresay if she had they'd be of enormous size. Excuse my candour; but all this—well, I've an idea it comes from your not having earlier taken to your arms that best of all moral and spiritual safeguards—a good, healthy, kind-hearted, sensible, *imperfect* English wife. O lord, man," cried Haig, "I'm three years younger than



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you—that's all, though you look old enough to be my grandfather—but I can tell you I don't intend to remain single much longer, even if I have to set to work to keep a wife."

"You are very young, Haig," Asgar said.

"Well, what's the use of getting old? I've only known two or three people who knew how to be old in the grand style. Your mother is one."

"My mother!"

"I wonder if you are really her son," said Haig, "or a changeling—"

"Haig! Haig! But of course you are not serious. You are obvious—and happy."

"Good thing too! Where's the sense of wasting one's life poking and glaring for the Impossible? You'll only get bleary-eyed and mentally out of your depth. Now I like to keep in shallow water, where you

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don't need to do so much gasping. I'm no metaphysician, thank heaven; but it seems to me that there's a forbidden fruit of the mind more dangerous than the forbidden fruit of the flesh. And when the two sorts are hunted after at the same time, as in your case——”

“My case?” said Asgar. “What do you mean?”

He spoke uneasily; he was grown pale.

“I can see now,” he added after a pause, “that you have been leading up to this. I was beginning to suspect a personal application in what you said. We won't quarrel, Haig; I don't think we could if we tried. But you will understand that I do not care to have my purely private concerns interfered with even by an old friend.”

This Asgar said with some heat. But the flash was momentary. Almost the instant after, he smiled (a curiously touchin

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smile, to Haig), lighted a cigarette, and appeared haggard and spiritless.

Haig, feeling on ground so uncertain, considered the chances of a surreptitious exploration of the tower. But Asgar, a man of moods, might yet take him into his confidence.

"Of course I'm sorry, old chap, if I've hurt you. But really—why do you shut yourself up here?"

"Perhaps to get on speaking terms with the stars."

"You're like the heathen, Asgar, you imagine vain things . . . There's some one on the stair!" Haig said in a hushed voice.

Asgar, giving him a quick glance, said, "Let her stay where she is!"

"But—who is it?"

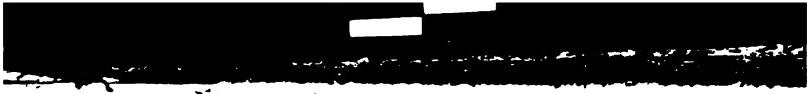
Haig advanced a step; every moment he expected to hear a cry. There was a whin-

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ing sound ; Asgar went to the inner door, which opened directly on to the stair that ran up through the tower, and let in a wire-haired white dog.

Haig looked at his watch.

"Now, old chap," he said cheerfully, "find your hat, or cap, or whatever unearthly thing you stick on your head—for I promised your mother that I'd bring you back to dinner."



VI

THE rector made the fourth at dinner, and talked about a witch in the Forest. He was a nice old gentleman, and could be got to believe in almost anything except Anglo-Catholics. He believed thoroughly in the witch, though he had never seen her, and confessed ingenuously that he was afraid to go to her unhallowed lair, deep in the Forest. She was a very ancient, very ugly, and supernaturally sinful old horror, it seemed, and Mr. Tarpath suggested that something should be done to make her mend her ways before Satan finally got her in his clutches.

"I am told there is a young girl with her," he said, "and I have been wonder-
" "

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ing can it possibly be poor Bessie Tice-hurst?"

The rector looked round the table ; Asgar was silent, and Haig did not raise his eyes.

"I have heard of the woman," Mrs. Asgar said, "and I understand that she has a daughter. I think with you, Mr. Tarpath, that she should be seen to. Some one was telling me that she is in a terrible condition, and that no one will go near her. The Forest people are so superstitious."

"And superstition is so cruel," said Haig.

"And so wicked," said the rector.

Mrs. Asgar turned the conversation by catching a moth which had maimed itself in a candle flame. She set it free from an open window, and began to speak of the scent of flowers from the garden.

They sat in a room of distinction. It was

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lighted solely by candles. The sweetened breath of the summer night came in with the moths.

Asgar had little to say, and seemed to shrink from disturbing his mother's serene happiness in having him there.

Mrs. Asgar was at the head of the table, an old-fashioned cameo brooch at her throat, a thin gold chain round her neck ; she wore a white rose which she had smilingly suffered Haig to fasten in her dress, saying, "You will make me quite vain in my old age ;" and had Haig expressed his thought, he would have said that the rose was not more beautiful than her face, nor purer than her soul.

The missing girl was spoken of again, and Mr. Tarpath told Haig that prayer was offered for her in church. Asgar's face remained inscrutable. Then the rector began to tackle with platitudes certain "de-

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plorable tendencies of the age," with special reference to "the growing spirit of sacerdotalism in our beloved Church."

Mrs. Asgar, with the perfect tact which never fails a good woman, put the subject on one side.

"I hardly think," she said, "the world is becoming more wicked, but men seem to be in danger of finding out too much about themselves. Why, little Ned Williams said to me the other evening, while walking back with me to Drum, that he could buy me in a chemist's shop! I was startled, and asked him what he meant, and then he explained to me how I am 'composed;' most learned talk about 'elements,' and I know not what. Dear me, I felt so foolish and ignorant; and thinking to give Master Ned a poser, I stopped and pointed to the Milky Way. 'Oh,' he cried, 'we're in the Milky Way too!' and I said to



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him, 'that is an awful thought, Ned, that you, who can be bought in a chemist's shop, should be able to go out there into space and understand that you are in the Milky Way, and know exactly where this tiny world is, and what it is doing, and what it is going to do millions of years hence.' "

"What did the great little man say?" Haig asked.

"He said, 'Oh, it's astronomy, and we learn it at school.' Yes," Mrs. Asgar went on, "men seem to be making a great looking-glass—I don't know what to call it, Humanity or Science—and they are turning to it and bowing down and worshipping. It is not the way of peace. For when the glass breaks, or becomes cloudy, or when some crazy worshipper throws mud upon it, then the others are just like children lost in a wood."



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"You are quite right, Mrs. Asgar," said the rector.

"I should say," Haig remarked, "that the world is growing more compassionate."

"I think so too," said Mrs. Asgar. "But is it the right kind of compassion? If people are simply pitying themselves in each other, that surely is not faith, but despair."

"This is a lay sermon," the rector observed. He appeared to feel that he had said something awkward, or perhaps rude, and added hastily, "But of course you preach to the converted."

The eyes of mother and son met. Haig had a strange impression of a child at its mother's breast, and of secrets miraculously revealed. The expression of Mrs. Asgar's face was unspeakably tender and gentle; and Asgar let his eyelids fall on tears. He forced himself to eat after that; Haig could

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see this, and wished the dinner was at an end.

"We shall be saved to happiness in this life by simplicity," Mrs. Asgar murmured.

The others were silent; none seemed to be able to find the acceptable words. Mrs. Asgar caught another moth, and gave it to a servant to put out of the window. The man crushed it in his hand and flung it out dead.

"You make me think of inaccessible heights, Mrs. Asgar," Haig said in a low tone.

She shook her head, and smiled sorrowfully.

"I am afraid I have been doing all the talking. But one thinks of so much in seclusion, and it will never do to allow Ned Williams to keep all the wisdom. I shall ask him, when I go to see his mother again, about the flowers. I doubt not I

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shall be able to turn the tables on him there."

She rose presently to go to her room. Asgar opened the door for her.

"God bless you," she whispered, embracing him with an infinite tenderness.

VII

ASGAR and Haig went with Mr. Tarpath to the rectory gate.

"He doesn't count, you know," Asgar said as in vagrant mood they strolled through the woods to the Deaf Tower.

"There's nothing, I suppose," said Haig, "in his suggestion about that girl hiding in the Forest?"

"He is a dull old gentleman," said Asgar.

"Of course you haven't an idea as to what's become of her?"

"No."

"You knew her—pretty well?"

"Yes."

Asgar had left a couple of candles burning

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in the tower, and leisurely lighted the others.
He locked the door on their entering.

"I can't imagine what possesses you to hang out here, old chap, where there's nothing—" Haig stopped suddenly. "Just listen!"

"Well?"

"It's my fancy, no doubt. But I keep thinking I hear somebody—or something—moving up there in the tower."

"And you aren't naturally a fanciful man, Haig."

"No; that's the odd thing about it."

"Unless it means," said Asgar, "that you brought the fancy with you."

Haig, taken by surprise, made a clumsy speech—

"But I had not heard of the girl's disappearance till this afternoon!"

Asgar, a lighted taper in his hand, passed before him.

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"You're quite wrong," he said, and turned away.

The last candle having been set going, the men then seated themselves and smoked. The blind of a window towards the moon was not pulled down, and the black outline of the trees could be seen upon the gray-white sky. Above the woods a fantastic cloud-figure, like a monstrous woman, moved slowly, and Haig's gaze was upon it.

Asgar sat on a couch with his back to the window.

"I give you my assurance, Haig, the girl is not here."

He spoke sincerely, as it seemed. But Haig could not help sticking to his suspicion.

"What about this Ritualism—this lay Brotherhood, Asgar? I have been reading something about it. Has it gone to pieces?"

"No; Ray Denis and Sylvester are hold-

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ing a mission in the North just now. They have to make collections; all the men who had money have left it. The Superior was to blame for the crash. He put on the screw intolerably; imagined himself a sort of Abbot Samson, and ruled accordingly. He used to send us about the streets distributing the mission bills, like a lot of sandwich men."

"Is that why you cleared out?"

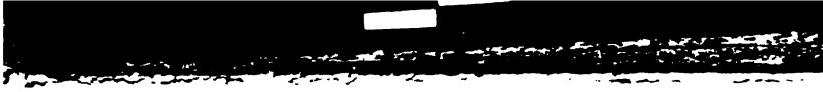
"No; I was one of the last to leave. I left because I lost the Sign of Immortality."

"What on earth do you mean?"

"I can't tell you; I don't quite understand it myself. I only know there was a sudden awakening—or," sighing, "as I daresay my mother would put it, a sudden eclipse. And since then nothing has seemed the same."

Asgar fell on a muse.

"The other Sunday," he went on, "I was wandering about the country, and in



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the afternoon I came to an old church in which a children's service was being held. I went in and sat in the shadow of a great pillar. The children were singing a hymn ; I knew the words well ; it had been one of our Brotherhood hymns. At the last verse the choir boys in their white surplices came down the chancel steps and sat among the other children. Then a young clergyman, an inspired look in his face, walked up and down the nave teaching the children, asking them questions, telling them in a humble simple way of the faith of the Saints. It was very beautiful, Haig, and I was profoundly touched. And I envied that young priest, and envied the little children still more. But it all seemed to me so strange, so unfamiliar, so incredible—like a lovely thing that had belonged to me too—at least in part, long, long ago, and had been lost, and could never be mine again. That

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is what I mean by losing the Sign of Immortality."

Haig, from a long silence, said—

" But how did it come about, old man ? "

" You see, it couldn't have been so sudden as it appeared to me at the time. I suppose I had never really stood on sure ground. I must have been drifting away imperceptibly. You know what I used to be, Haig ; you don't need to be told that it wasn't virtue that made me prematurely old. Great God ! I feel like the dregs of sin ! But I was never a hypocrite in Imberminster or at the Annunciation, or in the Brotherhood ; never consciously *that*. At the worst I worshipped the ideal I had made myself. Ah, my mother guesses the truth !—not the pure vision which annihilates desire in the exquisite spiritual torment that is hunger and thirst for absorption in the Light. Sylvester is like that, and Denis too, and Gurney ;

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they won't go back—*their* ideal is not earthward."

"But," Haig said, "all this goes flying over my head. I've no gift for worry about these things. If you'd come out of the clouds I might be able to follow you. I've not much imagination : and you've got too much—it bangs you about, this way and that, giving you an indigestion of moods, and generally playing old Harry with you. But you indicate a crisis. Was there another woman in it?"

"There was a crisis. I will tell you—as much as I can tell. We were at Imberminster, holding a mission there. I was still in the Brotherhood, but not of it. One morning the hall was nearly empty. I was on my knees at the door, utterly depressed and disgusted with myself. It was as though I had got to a blank wall and was beating myself against it. Sylvester was praying.



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The time had been when his prayers thrilled me, but now his words danced about like meaningless jargon. It was when I removed my hands from my face and looked up that I saw, kneeling alone in the row of chairs before me, a young girl. That was the crisis, Haig."

"I suspected as much : the vision of the creature stopped your quest for the unseen. I don't blame you, Asgar. Your fundamental blunder was that you had been trying to pervert the law of nature—for a time."

"She looked round at me ; our eyes met in a long gaze ; we could not help ourselves ; I claimed her—she did not resist. It was a miraculous moment ! She became my new emblem of immortality. The Brotherhood was no longer possible."

"A good thing too !" said Haig. "But what's the use of using all these big words ? You were in love—once more ; that's all. I

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suppose she was very pretty, and had a smart figure?"

"She expressed more than that to me!"

"Oh, that's all right; I've been afflicted myself in a reasonable way. But can't you picture her? This brawny-waisted damsels over the mantelshelf?—"

"No, no; I had that long before I joined the Brotherhood. I can tell you nothing about her; it is beyond me!"

"You oughtn't to put her in the skies, old chap; a woman doesn't feel comfortable there—at least, not so long as there's a man left on the earth. All the same, perhaps in this case it's for the best. Did you get to know her?"

"Yes!"

"I hope——"

"Haig, she is white as snow!"



VIII

"I'm jolly glad to hear it," said Haig.

He asked if she was married. Asgar answered, she was not.

"Your mother," said Haig, "has an entirely admirable sense of class. Oh, you may look scornful: I stick to it all the same. You mustn't get in the way of the brickbats of conventionalism. Personally I dodge them."

"The Philistine attitude."

"Of course it is; I'm a Philistine; I glory in it. I can't see the sense of amazing and grieving one's best friends, and generally making an ass of oneself. I conclude," said Haig, "the girl is not socially 'your equal.'



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"My mother would say she is not," Asgar replied.

"And I should agree with your mother. She has a rightness of feeling in these matters that means absolute sanity. Don't say anything! There's that noise up in the tower again. You hear that? Some one is lifting the latch of a door!"

Asgar called his dog.

"Do *you* hear anything, Yvette?"

"There it is again!" said Haig—"plain enough. Some one is clicking a door latch to attract attention."

"Let us go and see," said Asgar.

He took a candle and went to the inner door.

"Aren't you coming?" he said, glancing back at Haig.

He opened the door, and the candlelight illumined a damp stone staircase. Haig followed him up some forty cramped steps.

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Then Asgar stopped before a door, so small that a man could only have squeezed through it with difficulty. The door had a latch, but Haig could see no lock.

"Keep quiet—or you'll frighten her," Asgar said. "Hullo, Yvette; who told you to come? Go away!"

The dog slunk downstairs. Asgar lifted the latch and pulled open the door. Haig could make out nothing but a stone coping, gray with age, and a magnificent suggestion of moonlit night. Asgar went down on one knee and took something from his pocket.

"Come on, old girl," he said, "and have your supper. We heard you saying it was about time."

A big black cat, tail in air, back arched, prowled along, and Asgar stroked its head and neck.

"I'm sorry I can't take you in, poor old



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woman. Yvette wouldn't like it, you know : she's horribly jealous."

He shut the door.

"If you'll let me go down the stair first, Haig, you'll be able to see."

When they were in the room again : "You thought Miss Ticehurst was in the tower," Asgar said.

"I did, old chap."

"Is my mother under the same impression ?"

"Not at all, so far as I could gather. Do you know where she is ?"

"Would to God I did!"

"Why do you say that ?"

"Because—I did not tell you—she was the girl kneeling that day in the hall at Imberminster. I did not at once recognise her ; so many years had passed since I had seen her. She was on a visit to the town, and she told me she had gone to the hall

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in the hope of seeing me. She left home in order to save me from myself, and because my mother is a saint in her eyes, and she would rather die than give her pain. She told me this in a note written in pencil, and put under the door here, the night she went away. . . . All the noblest attributes of womanhood are summed up in her!"

Asgar went to the window, upon which the blind had not been drawn, and stood looking out upon the great yellow moon jolting over the trees.

"The affection of kindred is to her as the breath of life, and what she must suffer to be away from her own people, among strangers! And—although she said nothing of this—it is a reflection of unspeakable torment to me that her purity took fright. I know she loves me; but she loves her white soul more. It is her treasure above



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price, and she told me those other things, not to hurt me, in covering her flight. And in going she has thrown me back upon myself—and I can't bear the sight!"

"Have you made any attempt to discover her?" Haig asked, standing beside his friend.

"Yes, yes; I have done everything I can think of. She has friends in Imberminster, but she cannot be there. Again and again I am seized with an overmastering desire to go and search for her myself."

"Which accounts for your absences from Drum?"

"Yes—I can't help myself! The impulse may blaze up within me at any moment, and I am sure to obey it."

"I wouldn't if I were you, Asgar."

"Haig, you have no part in this; no one can come where we are, in just our atmosphere. If only I could catch a glimpse of

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the pure flame of her innocence, I would follow it round the world!"

He took Haig's arm.

"I couldn't resist telling you, old friend. And if I should go away suddenly again, you will comfort my mother, and regard my confidence? Stay at Drum as long as you can. There's some shooting to be had, in a quiet way," he added smiling.

"You want steadyng, old chap. And wouldn't it be merciful to tell her people the truth? They seem to have got hold of the most amazing suppositions."

"Her mother is being well cared for."

"But that's not everything. And then there's the woebegone Luke."

"I pity him."

"He manages apparently to shower plenty of that on himself," Haig said. "But I'm getting sleepy; come on back with me, and go to bed like a respectable citizen."

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Haig could not feel satisfied with what Asgar had told him about Bessie ; and one day he said to Mrs. Asgar that he thought of going to Imberminster—" Just to have a look round," he added.

" Some of your old friends are still living there," she said. " Mr. Gurney ; you will remember him ? He is curate at one of the churches. It may be the Annunciation ; I am not sure ; he keeps himself very quiet, but Colonel Loyd mentioned him in one of his letters to the newspaper."

" Gurney would hardly make a formidable traitor," Haig remarked. " He is so honest he would be constantly betraying the cause. I should like to have a chat with Mrs. Loyd. Do they live far from the town ? "

" No ; quite near to it. Their place is called Eventide. In—in the event of your calling at the clergy-house," Mrs. Asgar went on hesitatingly, " you might, perhaps,

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see Father Strauss." She paused again. "If he were to come to Drum, he might be able to do something for Edward. Anything would be better than this uncertainty."

"I shall certainly call at the clergy-house," said Haig. "Have I your authority to invite him to Drum?"

"Yes; if you think he would not be offended at its being given in an indirect way. Should he appear disposed to come, I would send him a formal invitation—in the hope that his being here might have a tranquillising influence on Edward."

"I'll put it neatly to him," said Haig. "I might learn something about Miss Ticehurst in Imberminster," he added.

But Mrs. Asgar shook her head.

IX

HAIG, having walked from Imberminster to Eventide, was rubbing the dust off his boots on the lawn, when he saw a lady, in a modish silver-gray gown, sitting under a tree. She was reading: he had got close to her before she noticed him. She gave him a smile of bright welcome, and said she was afraid to rise, her camp-stool was so flimsy.

"You will find another in the summer-house there; bring it and sit beside me."

Her book was on the grass when he returned; she laughed as his stool stretched and creaked.

"You are looking very well," said Mrs. Loyd.

"So this is Eventide," said Haig.
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"Yes; but please don't be disagreeably sympathetic. The place was called Eventide when we came here. It made me feel a little uneasy at first: the name was rather suggestive of personal reflection, you know. But Colonel Loyd would not alter it; I couldn't get him to realise my wounded feelings—he is so perverse in some things: and in ten years one becomes reconciled to anything."

Mrs. Loyd was a handsome, systematic, clear-cut woman, ornamental but not florid, energetic yet reposeful. Her big dark-brown eyes had an alert commonplace expression; she wore a great many rings, and was fond of sticking herself over with metallic shining things; her teeth were rather large. Men of middle life liked Mrs. Loyd for her cheerful social intelligence, her tact, her freedom from sentiment: young men and boys liked her because she seemed to them to personify



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mother, sister, and lady friend. She could pull a high-spirited youngster's ear without making him feel in the least humiliated. Her hair was white, and Haig found himself admiring her for not trying to conceal that fact. She had indeed tried to conceal it as long as she could, and then her surrender was unconditional. She had distinct views on manners and no views at all on morals apart from the conventional code. She was regarded by her friends as a thoroughly sensible woman. Of course she was popular.

Haig told her he was staying at Drum.

"I have never been there; Colonel Loyd says it is a charming old place. I have met Mrs. Asgar two or three times: a sweetly old-fashioned lady, like a picture of somebody's mother in the Academy."

"Yes: she is the ideal mother of a good many men," said Haig.

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"What is that absurd son of hers doing now? They say he has started a monastery or some nonsense of that sort."

"He is at Drum just now," said Haig. "The monastery was nothing worse than a lay Brotherhood; I can't imagine Asgar's shutting himself up in a cell for long and living on locusts and wild honey. Has he been to Eventide?"

"Oh no!" Mrs. Loyd was much amused. "Good gracious, no! He wouldn't come here; he and Colonel Loyd are sworn enemies."

"I am sorry to hear that."

"There is nothing in it, really, you know," said Mrs. Loyd. "They don't agree about religion; Colonel Loyd is a terrible Evangelical and hates all those Ritualists. He is constantly writing to the papers saying they are wolves in sheep's clothing and I don't know what, and ought to be turned

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out of the Church. Mr. Asgar answered some of his letters and made Colonel Loyd very angry indeed; so he got up a Protestant meeting at the town-hall, and took the chair, and the Annunciation people stormed the platform and there was the most dreadful uproar. Colonel Loyd was quite ill for several days after; and really I told him it served him right for bothering himself about such silly things."

"But surely Asgar did not disturb the meeting?"

"He was not there personally; but Colonel Loyd says he has evidence proving him to have incited the Annunciation roughs. He even went so far as to consult his lawyer with a view to having Mr. Asgar prosecuted. When I heard of that," said Mrs. Loyd smiling, "I put down my foot. One can't be made to look ridiculous even if one's husband has a taste for reli-



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gious squabbles. Helena's extraordinary infatuation is bad enough, but one can explain that away to one's friends as merely a temporary aberration."

"Is Miss Loyd interested in Ritualism?"

"Oh, she has been completely carried away by it. We have a nice pretty church of our own up here; Colonel Loyd is churchwarden, and is just now dreadfully perturbed over certain Popery symptoms in the new curate; but Helena won't go there—she walks dozens of times in the course of a week, in all sorts of weather, to Imberminster to attend the Annunciation services. You can understand how frightfully annoyed her father is. He scarcely speaks to her now, and says those Ritualistic priests have given him his death-blow. I must tell you he is getting quite stout," said Mrs. Loyd with twinkling eyes.

"But, of course, Helena's conduct is ex-



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tremely annoying, and I blame Mr. Asgar for having persuaded her."

"They are on friendly terms, then?" said Haig, pricking up his ears.

"Well, they met a few times, and I did not mind their being together, until I discovered it was all about religion and saints' days, and fasting and crossing and bowing, and all that childishness. Then I put a stop to it. But what an odd thing that I should have been the innocent cause of what she calls her 'conversion'! The Colonel does not know; I would not for the world have him suspect anything of the kind. What with his periodical outbursts against the Ritualists—his study is full of Protestant books and pamphlets; horrid cheap papers with a stuffy smell—and Helena's craze—so contrary to everything I have taught her—it is a mercy," said Mrs. Loyd, "that I am of a cheerful disposition."

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"Miss Loyd may get tired of the novelty by-and-by," said Haig, "and give it up."

"That is what I tell her father. But he says those priests have ruined her for ever. He does use shocking language when he is excited; and I must say Helena is a little provoking in the foolish way she obeys the Annunciation people. She put up in her room the text, 'He that loveth father or mother more than Me cannot be My disciple.' I was quite angry with her and took it down at once. It may be in the Bible," said Mrs. Loyd, "but it was hardly respectful to her father and me."

"Was she very much upset?"

"Oh no; not at all; I suppose she looked on herself as a martyr. That is the worst of people who give up their will and reason on taking to religion—it always makes them happy to be persecuted, as they call it. But you have not told me what Mr.

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Asgar is doing? He must be doing something; I never knew such a fidget."

"He is looking for the Perfect Woman."

"What an amazing man," said Mrs. Loyd.
"Is she to be found?"

"I hope not," said Haig. "For my part, I don't want to find her; I should think she would be rather difficult to get on with."

"I should think so indeed," said Mrs. Loyd. "The best thing he can do is to go into that monastery and dream about her."

"But there is no Anglican monastery for him to go into, is there?" asked Haig.

"Oh yes; Colonel Loyd says the country is full of secret societies controlled by the priests."

Mrs. Loyd regarded the point of her shoe awhile in silence.

"From all one hears, Mr. Asgar has not

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always confined his attentions to the Perfect Woman."

"I grant his own imperfection," said Haig. He too paused a moment. "I suspect that a quite human lady must have crossed his path in Imberminster."

Mrs. Loyd shook her head.

"I have heard nothing. There was no scandal—in that way—while he was here. He lived at the Annunciation clergy-house for some time, and left it suddenly. But I understood that was due to his taking up with the monastery idea."

"Oh, I don't say there was anything wrong," said Haig. "His mother is rather anxious about him. What sort of fellows are they at the clergy-house?"

"I have only spoken once to Father Strauss, and I don't like him."

"He does not come to Eventide?"

Mrs. Loyd laughed.

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"I positively dislike him," she said. "One can see he is a woman-hater; and he has a horrid ecclesiastical mouth."

"Gothic or Perpendicular?" said Haig.

"Square and unsympathetic," said Mrs. Loyd. "I fancy he has three rows of teeth."

"And a hoof? I can smell the brimstone. I must go and see the monster," said Haig. "What did Asgar find to do at the Annunciation?"

"He danced to Father Strauss's tune."

"He has a will of his own."

"He can't have in religious matters," said Mrs. Loyd.

Haig looked at her with admiration.

"You've hit the nail on the head, Mrs. Loyd. That is just what ails him. How did you know—knowing so little of him?"

"Helena told me he was their thurifer—the man who swings the incense about, you know; and sometimes their cross-bearer. I

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guessed the rest. No gentleman who retained his self-respect would allow himself to be placed in such a ridiculous position. I confess it pained me, and I felt very sorry indeed for his poor mother. The Asgars of Drum are one of the oldest families in the county."

"So," said Haig, "he surrendered his will and prostrated himself before the altar."

"Now you are mocking."

"I assure you I am not, Mrs. Loyd. It is a mystery to me, this tremendous fact of the sacerdotal power. It breaks down even the spirit of Edward Asgar, so tempestuously arrogant and insistent in all things else."

"Yes, it is astonishing," said Mrs. Loyd ; "still, I think it is rather silly, all the same. And he seems to have forsaken the Annunciation."

"But has he forsaken the Church ?" said Haig. "He may have given Father Strauss

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the slip. Can you doubt that he will return?"

"Well, you see, I *want* to doubt it."

"Why, may I ask?"

"Oh, because—if *he* cannot get away what chance is there for poor Helena?"

Mrs. Loyd sighed.

"Perhaps it is inevitable," said Haig. "Of late I have been thinking about these things more than I had ever done before; and it seems to me there is a Catholic instinct in humanity, just as there is a Protestant instinct. And one can't make much headway against one's natural instincts."

"But Catholicism and Protestantism are unknown to millions of people."

"Among these, I suspect, their equivalents are to be found. It appears to be fundamental, rooted in our natures from the beginning; and it is curious that it should only be the indifferents—the few—who are

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able to perceive this and acquiesce in it. If I should think of it, and have a chance, I shall pitch this theory at Father Strauss," said Haig.

"Oh, he won't argue with you," Mrs. Loyd cried with impatience. "Colonel Loyd has written him multitudes of very strong letters, and he has not replied to a single one of them. He cannot be a gentleman, and it is very distressing that Mr. Asgar should have fallen so utterly under his influence. He was Mr. Asgar's Pope."

"I understand," said Haig, "that the Ritualists claim to have everything but the Pope."

"I wish they would take him as well," said Mrs. Loyd, "and have done with it! Colonel Loyd says if they would only go over to Rome he would be quite content. He blames the bishops for keeping them in the Church."



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"Perhaps the bishops are afraid," Haig observed, "of making an enormous gap. Matters have gone so far it wouldn't be safe for them to act consistently on Protestant principles. The Ritualists seem to be winning all along the line, and the prospect of whole congregations 'going over' no doubt accounts for the apparent trimming of the rulers of the Church."

"I hate the smell of incense," said Mrs. Loyd ; "it is so un-English. I like to have everything plain and above board in my religion ; and as for going to confession, I should as soon think of painting my face green ! I can't find words to say how absurd it is. I am a member of the Church of England, and everybody knows there is no mystery about *that*."

Haig stayed to luncheon at Eventide, and then walked back to Imberminster.

X

THE Annunciation clergy-house, a prosaic building in two storeys, stood between a Primitive Methodist chapel and a public-house. Haig's chin dimpled with humour: he would at any rate have a bit of fun to take back to Mrs. Asgar. The Primitive Methodist chapel looked a little shy and self-conscious, but perhaps that was because it was new and had the name of a lady of title on its corner-stone. The public-house also was new, and exceedingly brazen.

A boy in livery admitted Haig and showed him into a small bare room which seemed to need ventilation. Haig had never seen so much untidiness produced by such meagre material. The furniture was limited to a



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single cane-seated chair and a broken-legged table heaped up with old magazines. While waiting Haig turned over a few of the magazines and was mildly surprised at the literary tastes of the Annunciation clergy. On the wall was a coloured picture of the Blessed Virgin as the Mother of Sorrows: her heart, exposed, was full of arrows. On the mantelshelf was a little statue of the Virgin and Child. The corners of the window-panes were smeared with cobwebs.

"You wish to speak to me?"

"Father Strauss?"

"Yes."

"I am staying at Drum. Mrs. Asgar—Mr. Edward Asgar's mother—it occurred to her—you might like to know he is quite well."

This was not at all how Haig had intended to begin.

Father Strauss disconcerted him. He

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was a dark, sinewy, secretive man of forty or so : "priest" was blazoned upon him from head to foot ; he had a black beard and fanatical eyes ; his high intellectual forehead was extraordinarily white, and smooth as a child's ; he had a clostral air which seemed to say, "I am in the world but not of it ; I am sorry for the world, but if it will eat the husks on which the swine feed. . ." His cassock made him seem taller than he actually was, and gave him a distinguished appearance. He recalled to Haig priestly figures in mediæval mass-books.

"Won't you sit down ?"

As there was only one chair Haig replied that he was not in the least tired : the truth being he felt vaguely that seated he would be at a disadvantage in the presence of this self-possessed cleric.

He was seized with a desire to say some-

thing to show Father Strauss that he was a hopeless worldling.

"Mr. Asgar is thinking of getting married," he blurted out.

"Quite so," said Father Strauss, in a tone which implied that he had ceased to concern himself in Mr. Asgar's affairs.

"Perhaps you know the lady," said Haig audaciously.

"I am afraid I have not that honour."

"But he met her in Imberminster."

"Indeed!"

Father Strauss gazed out of the window.

"Is the lady you speak of a Church-woman?"

"I am not sure as to that," said Haig.
"No doubt she is."

Father Strauss's face told no tales.

"Mr. Asgar will return to the true fold," he said. "Kindly tell him we are praying for him at the Annunciation. The

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Holy Sacrifice is offered for his re-conversion."

"Oh, I don't think he has bolted very far from you," said Haig.

The frown on the clergyman's brows was scarcely perceptible; of plainer significance was the inclination of his head toward the door, which on entering he had left open.

"Mr. Asgar is not very happy," said Haig.

"That is quite conceivable," Father Strauss remarked. "There can be no possibility of happiness for him until he returns. All our prayers in regard to him are directed to that end. He cannot be happy in rebellion; it is for his soul's welfare that he should not be; God is punishing him. We have known this from the beginning of his disobedience."

"You have been in communication with him?"

"No." Father Strauss for the first time

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let his eyes meet Haig's. "May I ask if you are a Christian?"

"Well, I hope so—in a way," said Haig, colouring.

"Then you ought to know that more things are understood by faith than by sight." He scrutinised Haig more searchingly. "Did I understand you to say that Mr. Asgar has sent you here?"

"No; his mother thought—I may say she is very anxious about him. Of course you know how a mother frets when her son goes on in that way."

"Does she desire him to return to us?"

"Well, I can't say that exactly. She is Low Church, you know. But she would rather see him return to you than go on as he is now. She thought you might like to come to Drum to see what could be done for him."

"Is this Mrs. Asgar's wish?"

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"Oh yes. She will be pleased to make your acquaintance, she bids me say."

"I am much obliged to her. Kindly assure her of that. Is Mr. Asgar at Drum?"

"He is there; but he is not living in the house. He has shut himself up—it pretty well comes to that—in a tower in the park. I think it would do you good to spend a few days at Drum, sir."

Father Strauss inclined his head very slightly, as if to imply that the pleasures of sense were as nothing to him.

"I will do as Mrs. Asgar wishes," he said gravely; "but I shall be glad if you will warn her that I am not sanguine of success. Personally I seek no influence whatever over Mr. Asgar. His apostasy—I must call it that, yet perhaps the term is too harsh—has deeply grieved me as an interruption of friendship. But this is a small, a very small

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matter compared with his higher and eternal spiritual interests. And these supreme interests can only be guarded so far by the Church. She cannot employ force. You doubtless know where he stands now. God and His church are calling to him to return. His conscience is pointing him to the way of peace ; he has walked in it, and he will return. His disobedience is terrible to contemplate : he stands in jeopardy every hour. He hears—he must always hear—the Divine Shepherd's voice calling him back to the fold ; and we can do nothing more. I indeed shrink," said Father Strauss in a tone of mingled earnestness and humility, "from making a mere personal appeal to him. That is not the way in which he will be won again ; hitherto, I fear, he has allowed himself to be subject too much to such influence. I regret it. But we could not help ourselves ; the weakness was in

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himself, and we found it difficult to eradicate, and at last—perhaps—we became accustomed to it. I say this in order that you may make it plain to Mrs. Asgar how far I shall deem it expedient to go in persuasion during any visit I may make to Drum."

"Quite so," said Haig ; but he decided that it would be wiser to leave the explanation to Father Strauss himself.

" You mentioned, I think, that Mr. Asgar is contemplating marriage." Father Strauss saying this turned suddenly to the door. " That is a purely private matter, I apprehend, and his mother may possibly have some observation to address to me on the subject."

" Perhaps I went too far," said Haig, " in giving you the idea that he is going to be married shortly. I don't think anything is definitely settled yet."

As Haig followed Father Strauss into

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the corridor he was nearly run down by an impetuous young priest carrying an armful of Jerusalem lilies.

“Gurney!”

“Arthur! what has brought you here?”

“Old friends! then I will leave you together,” and Father Strauss bowed to Haig and passed on.

“Come into my room, Arthur; Beilby is there; he will be glad to see you too.”

XI

ONLY sacred pictures were suffered to be in the Annunciation clergy-house. There was one of Christ in Gethsemane over the chimneypiece in Father Gurney's room. It was while gazing on this picture (it was a conception of greatness and humility) that he had decided to enter the Church. "This —or brute-beastism," he had said to himself in an exaltation; "there is no alternative." He too was tall, with eager burning eyes; and the pitiful women of the Annunciation congregation whispered to each other that he looked consumptive.

Gurney promptly shut the door: Beilby was smoking very strong tobacco; Father

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Strauss had complained of its getting into his throat and making him cough.

"What do you think of Jack now, Arthur?"

"He's bigger," Haig replied smiling. "As a boy he flaunted the promise of abnormal physical development. As a man he is an immense success."

"And as a parson—I'm the most sensible parson in Imberminster," said Beilby.

"No, no, Jack; you must have missed your vocation," said Haig. "You should have married a rich amazon and settled down to agriculture and a gigantic family."

"I could do with the rich amazon," laughed Beilby; "I draw the line at the others."

He was a huge, jolly, red-haired, bull-necked young fellow; his vitality bulged in insolent predominance.

"Have you heard anything of Asgar?" he cried, throwing his legs up on a sofa.

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"Yes; he is having a quiet time at Drum."

"Why the dickens doesn't he give me an invite? A week or two at that outlandish Eden is just what I want."

"No doubt he will send you an invitation to his wedding," Haig observed.

"Oh, has it come to that? there's a slap in the face for the Annunciation icicles!"

As Beilby roared out a laugh Gurney glanced at the door and whispered, "Ssh!"

"Who's the bride?" Beilby asked, interested.

"She is so good, so perfect," said Haig, "that I decline to tarnish her fair fame by mentioning even her name in your company."

"She must be a stunner," said Beilby.
"Plenty of money?"

"Can't say. Is this news to you?"

"It is to me."

Gurney nodded. "It must have been sudden," he remarked. "There was no

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indication of anything of the sort while he was in Imberminster. He returned to the town after joining the Brotherhood, and I saw nothing of him then."

"Father Strauss didn't approve?"

"He thought the Brotherhood premature and—rather schismatical. Asgar did not come to the clergy-house during the mission ; it was scarcely in good taste for him to return to the town so soon after his break with the Annunciation. He may have met the lady then."

"Asgar's the man to arrive at matrimony with a jump," said Beilby. "When is the wedding?"

Haig could not say.

"I believe you're kidding us, Haig," Beilby said. "Now come—what really has happened to Asgar?"

"I have told you : a woman has happened."

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"That's all right," said Beilby. "But you seem to be considerably in the dark."

"I am not his father confessor," said Haig.

"That's a nasty knock at old Strauss," Beilby exclaimed. "Anyhow, it's comforting to hear that Asgar has some of the elemental instincts. Gurney says they're mostly brutish."

"I hope not; I'm full of them," Haig admitted. "I suppose it depends on the brute—meaning the man."

"Asgar is miles and miles too serious," said Beilby.

"I have wondered if his is not perhaps the wrong kind of seriousness," Father Gurney quietly remarked. "He used to be very much in earnest—at times; and then his earnestness seemed to get distorted somehow, and one could hardly tell it from —from carelessness."

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"That is one reading of his character," said Haig. "A man of Asgar's temperament—a born mediævalist in religion—can't get on without mystery amid clouds of incense and the authority of priests—the authority that can be seen and felt. He ought to have entered the Church."

Gurney held up his hands.

"No, no!—oh no, that would never do!"

"It would have kept him screwed up tight at one extreme," said Haig. "He would have been a fearful clerical tyrant; as a village rector his dear people would have had a lively time of it. But there can't be the slightest doubt, you know, that he is of the ecclesiastical type; and had he taken orders he would have been consistent, and the clear course of work would in time have steadied him. He won't be quiet till he wears out, and it would have been safer for him to wear out



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in knowing what he was doing, or trying to do."

"We had a good deal of trouble with him here," Gurney said. "But as a priest—oh, that is impossible!"

"Gurney is shirking the point," said Beilby. "The plain truth is no bishop would have accepted him for ordination—at least ours wouldn't. He's awfully particular."

"Is Asgar shaky in his theology then?" Haig asked.

"I would not say that," Gurney answered, "although there were certain symptoms—and I do not know where he may stand now."

"Too advanced, then?"

"Look here, Haig," said Beilby. "I see you don't know anything about the making of a parson. You're a bit of a Dissenter, aren't you?"

"Say an onlooker. And I have seen

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enough to know that the ecclesiastical game is being mighty cleverly played."

"You are not a Dissenter surely, Haig?" Gurney inquired anxiously.

"Oh, I mustn't horrify you by confessing to anything so bad as that! It will be less of a shock to you if I say that I'm something of an agnostic."

"I know lots of thoroughly sound chaps who are agnostics," said Beilby.

"But I want to know," pursued Haig, "why it would have been impossible for Asgar to become a parson?"

"Well, then," said Beilby, "here it is. When you go in for orders, you've got at the very outset to produce satisfactory evidence of your life and conversation from the time of your birth."

"Did you manage to do that, Jack?"

"I did: the mater and uncle Dick between them concocted a splendid certificate of

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moral character for me." He gave a hearty laugh. "I am not saying it was all gospel ; but there it was—just what was wanted, and more to come if it had been asked for ; and nobody could contradict it——"

"Because you had never been found out?"

Beilby waved his enormous arm.

"Anyhow, I'm a parson now," said he, "and as wary as they make 'em. But poor old Asgar has given himself away no end of times. I daresay he would have stuck to the business magnificently ; and with a big church, a gorgeous ritual—he *can* manage a pageant : they've got sloppy at the Annunciation since he left—and a glorious uproar every now and then among the Evangelicals—oh, Asgar would have been in clover! But it wasn't to be ; and there's an end of it. Asgar allowed himself the luxury of scandalising the social conventions, and

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you can't go in for open-air beer and skittles and be a parson as well."

"I see," said Haig. "I congratulate you, Jack. You'll be a vicar some day, no doubt ; and then I shall want to congratulate your beautiful flock."

"I'm all right," laughed Beilby. "I don't give myself spiritual airs : I've never claimed to be perfect."

"I understand," said Haig, "that in nineteen centuries the Christian Church has managed to produce a single perfect Christian."

"Who may that be ?" Jack asked.

"St. Francis of Assisi," said Haig.

"He was a Catholic," said Gurney. "But you talk wildly, Haig," he added with a strange gentleness. "It would be more correct to say that there has been no perfect Christian ; I have often, at any rate, thought it must be so ; the Divine Ideal cannot be

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reached on earth. But, thanks be to God, countless thousands of Christians have made the world sweeter and purer!"

"By the way," put in Beilby, "old Profraze was telling me a funny story. He was passing a schismatic shop and heard through an open window a fellow yelling out, 'Men of Imberminster! keep your hands in your pockets and starve out these Ritualistic priests!' 'Why,' said old Profraze—you know how his watery old eyes twinkle over a good thing—'my Sunday collection is only five shillings!'"

Beilby went off in a fit of laughter; he was fond of tickling his own ribs.

"Is this young man," said Haig, jerking his head toward Beilby, "one of the Annunciation curates?"

"Goodness, no!" cried Jack; "I'm not the sort to give myself away. The English people will never stand Ritualism, and a

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sensible man wants a dab of jam on his bread and butter."

"Catholic truth," said Gurney, "must be restored to the Church of England. It belongs to her; she is nothing if not Catholic—a mere sect, ruled by laity; if I believed her to be Protestant I should not remain within her pale another day."

"Why not?" Haig asked.

"Don't tempt him to talk!" Beilby cried; "there's no stopping him once he goes off on that tack."

"Because," said Father Gurney earnestly, "the wicked heart, the rebellious and vain-glorious imagination of man can only be curbed by an infallible voice in a visible Church."

"You mean what's called the Power of the Keys?" said Haig.

"Yes. The idea of the Church is vague and nebulous without the Power of the

Keys. Apart from that power—in other words, a Divinely-appointed Apostolic priesthood—that awful gift to man, the religious imagination, cannot be held in check. It becomes its own law, its own priest, its own confessor; and although in noble and humble minds this may not be perilous to the spiritual life, we have to remember that the human heart is naturally disobedient, that its tendency is to lull itself into a false security, and that the vast majority of men and women are not noble and are not humble."

"I told you!" said Beilby.

"But can't you controvert him, Jack?"

"Hopeless to try! There's room for him in the Church of England—the freest Church in the world. But our common-sense English folk will never stand it; they've got precious stiff necks, and they're not going to let us parsons bend them to our yoke."

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"Beilby, Beilby," said Gurney with pain,
"that is the cry of the world."

"I say it is! Why not?—sensible men
always go in for compromise."

"It seems to me," said Haig, "that one
half the Church is busy explaining why it be-
lieves too much, while the other half is apolo-
gising for not believing enough. No wonder
we sinful worldlings stand on one side and
only try to be neighbourly and charitable!"

"Is Asgar," said Gurney, "happy in—
I will not say standing on one side—but
with less than the whole truth?"

"I can't say he is. His case is peculiar."

"No, no! He is a more marked type;
that is all. He has the religious imagina-
tion, and it is in revolt. The Holy Catholic
Church is impelling herself upon the pride
of his understanding; and she will break
down that pride or he will go from bad to
worse. The struggle must end in victory

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

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for the Church. Even should he delay submission to his deathbed, he must yield at last. "No man," said Father Gurney with passionate sincerity, "who has prostrated himself before God and His angels at the Holy Sacrifice of the altar, can ever again turn away from the power of that heavenly mystery. He cannot if he would; he cannot, he cannot, he cannot! He may be unfaithful for a while; spiritual blight may fall upon him; Satan may seduce and blind. But he will come again! we *know* he will come again!"

The young priest wiped the sweat from his face.

This glimpse of a terrific force, mysterious though so openly proclaimed, impressed Haig more than he cared to admit. It made apparently no impression at all upon Beilby, who lay on his back smoking and pouting his sensual lips at the ceiling.



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"Who brought those lilies, Gurney?" he asked, evidently with a view to changing the conversation.

"A poor woman."

"Is that why you looked so pleased?" Haig said in a low voice.

"I was glad to see you," Gurney replied.

Haig was silent awhile. He contrasted his two friends, and, although Haig was not one to get down very deep into anything, he felt that there was here a ghastly mockery. He could understand Gurney's position, though it did not win his sympathy; but for Jack's standpoint he had not a particle of respect. Jack had clearly adopted the "clerical profession" in precisely the spirit that men adopt the profession of medicine, of journalism, or of the law.

"You'll die an archdeacon, Jack."

"Or a rural dean," said Gurney, brightening.

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"I should like to see you in your surplice. You must look like a sacrificial bullock. Red-polled Aberdeen——"

"The fashionable colour," said Beilby. "When I was a kid I hated it; now it is a joy for ever and the admiration of all women."

He opened his chasm of a mouth and let the smoke curl out.

"Gurney gets thin on fanaticism. I grow fat on the Via Media."

"I heard some one say that Newman had pulverised the Via Media," said Haig.

"Oh no; he only pulverised himself in trying to. The Via Media in religion is indigenous to the English soil. It's the sound old churchy-toryism; Gurney is a mad religious radical. It is a frightful waste of energy; for his dreams aren't going to come true. The world will never go crazy again on Catholicism."

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"I don't think it will," said Haig. "The outsiders—such as you and I, Jack—will keep its giddy old head steady when it begins to prance."

"The world's religious standard cannot be accepted," said Gurney—"not for one moment!"

"One doesn't need to know much of his New Testament to be able to subscribe to that," said Haig. "Myself, I am incapable of fanaticism, but I can see it is the way to power in religious matters. Nobody will go to the stake under your leadership, Jack. I say, old chap, what induced you to become a parson?"

"There's a couple of good livings in the family," Beilby explained with candour.

"It seems positively indecent," said Haig. "What do you think of yourself when you're preaching to the faithful?"

"Don't talk shop," said Jack. "I'm not

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a humbug, anyhow. I enjoy life; I don't blink at it like a chick breaking through an egg. That's the mistake the religious extremists make: they're frightened to death of being alive; the bare thought of the natural passions puts them in a blue funk. What an idiotic blunder! Asgar said to me once it depressed him to think of the things that would never be done; and instead of sitting down philosophically and leaving all these botherations to mend themselves—as they always do if you don't make a fuss—off the fool goes on that Brotherhood rot, mad as a hatter! It's bad sense and worse policy," said the Reverend John Beilby. "But I daresay he'll be all right now he's to be fixed up in the holy estate. Aren't you going to give us something to drink, Gurney? My throat wants damping."

[REDACTED]

XII

HAIG sought to be as a son to his hostess, and liked to go about with her in her country rambles.

She walked as a rule, but sometimes sat in a little basket-carriage drawn by a pony that loved delights and scorned laborious days. The creature was preposterously fat, and presently, after certain encouragements to energy surreptitiously received, conceived an abhorrence of Haig.

"You must come and see us in the spring," Mrs. Asgar said, "when the birds are nesting. Drum is then so pretty. It is a delightful experience to go close to a bird while it is sitting on its nest and find that it is not at all afraid of you. The
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birds, I think, know quite well when you are their friend. Every autumn and winter we have a great many robins, and I seem to recognise their faces year after year."

Haig did not find this sort of talk dull; but had he been telling the story of Asgar he would have left it out.

On rainy days Mrs. Asgar spent much of her time painting great sayings (mostly from the New Testament) on gilt-edged cards, which she sent to the prisoners in Imberminster gaol. Haig, having a tolerable gift this way too, helped her, not without an inward smile at the irony of the situation. Some of the cards, it occurred to him, might not inappropriately have been addressed to himself, and others to Asgar.

His thoughts frequently ran on his absent friend and the girl Bessie. From what he had gathered about her he was unable to frame her in his mind as an enchantress;

apparently she was just an ordinary, healthy, honest English lassie, with an old-fashioned sense of class distinctions.

The idealisation was in Asgar's perfervid brain; his delirium was inadequately expressed by the word love, as men and women understand it in their relations toward each other. The religious instinct was strong in Asgar, and it had obviously undergone some strange perversion.

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(Haig to his sister.) . . . I am amused to hear of your being interested in Father Strauss. I don't think you would like him, Joan; he is not at all a lady's parson; he has no social small talk, and I shouldn't suppose he takes the slightest interest in the fashionable world except with a view to walking into its affections from the pulpit. He is a splendid curser. You are not the sort of woman he attracts.

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My dear girl, you mustn't let yourself get caught in this new craze ; I have nothing to say against it as a system for those who need that kind of system ; but you are much too healthy to take to it with the zeal necessary for success. They would look on you as a very unpromising recruit ; and isn't it too late for you to begin to go to confession ? What a lot of sins you must have forgotten ! If I heard of your being in the confessional I should want to kick the thing to pieces and lug you away by force. So you mustn't be silly at your time of life.

I doubt if there is anything I can tell you about Strauss. Personally he is a noticeable chap, but I find him objectionable. He makes me think rather disagreeably of the Holy Inquisition. He is the ecclesiastic from head to foot. I don't for a moment question his sincerity, but he makes me feel that if I were anything at all I should be a Protestant.

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It strikes me as an amazing sign of the clannishness of humanity that Christians should ticket themselves this, that, and the other thing, when the teaching of Christ is so plain that even I can understand it. The truth seems to be that folk want to be spiritually bossed. I should think that this must result in the worship of the boss to some degree. There's philosophic profundity for you!

Strauss left this morning : he stayed only one night at Drum.

What exactly Mrs. Asgar's opinion of him is I can't tell you ; the sweet old lady has the wonderful quietness that may mean anything or nothing. So far as I know, Strauss made no attempt to tackle her on the religious question. But she tackled him ! If it didn't come to that then I am much mistaken.

Last night at family prayers it chanced

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to be her turn to read about "Consider the lilies," &c. She stopped, and I knew something was coming; the dear old soul looked more saintly than ever. She paused, repeated the words, paused again, and I noticed uneasiness in Strauss's eyes. I wish I could give you what Mrs. Asgar said; I shall never forget it, but I can only remember the impression she made, not the words she used. It was all about her favourite doctrine of simplicity, uttered in a voice of inexpressible sweetness. Of course it was miles above me; nearly everything Mrs. Asgar says is—I mean when she is talking outside worldly affairs. I should say she didn't deliberately set herself to go for the reverend father's ornamental and elaborate way of getting to heaven; it appeared to me she couldn't help doing it; and when afterwards she gave him his candle and bade him good-

night, her manner was quite humble and apologetic.

To my mind it would be an honour for even the Reverend Father Strauss to touch Mrs. Asgar's lovely old hand; but she is the last in the world to have any such notion. She gave him a kind of reverential curtsey in answer to his bow as they said good-night. If it weren't for you women and the woman in man, these priests would pretty soon find their occupation gone, I fancy.

Strauss came to see Asgar, but did not see him; and I believe a second visit is talked of should Asgar not mend his ways. His mother, I gather, would rather see him back with Strauss than going on as he is. He must have got wind of the parson's being here, and dodged him. It is Asgar's way to dodge about when a plain course would end his difficulties. That is one of

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the disadvantages of having a complex mind. I am pharisaical enough to thank the Lord that I am only an average man ; and I want you, my dear girl, to remain just an average woman. The more I see of the advanced folk with their inflamed nerves and boiling brains and chatter about the dusk of their souls, the less I want to follow in their wake.

But it was rather shabby of Asgar to treat his father confessor in that fashion. Strauss took me only so far into his confidence —he's a wily customer. Had there been a frank conversation between us I should have done my best to shock the good man.

The rector here is not at all charitably disposed toward Strauss. He was as brusque with him as a bishop with a curate, and evidently regards him as a wolf in sheep's clothing, a Jesuit in disguise, and so forth.

Strauss doesn't seem to have any ill-will against me, but apparently he has given me up as a bad lot, one of the wicked.

"There is no case so hopeless," he said to Mrs. Asgar, with a significant glance at me, "as that of the man who looks with calm impartiality upon all religions."

It wasn't quite fair of him, because just previously, as we strolled together in the park, he had been artfully pumping me. He is no doubt sincere at present in his attachment to the Church of England; but I don't think it would take much to make him bolt to Rome.

As I understand the controversy—and I am finding myself just now up to the ears in other people's theology (having none of my own)—the whole point is that Father Strauss and his party deny that the Church is Protestant except in a very limited sense: that is to say, they would certainly protest

against the Pope's interference in temporal matters in England. Which is absurd.

Strauss has condescended once or twice to lay down the ecclesiastical law to me in the course of our somewhat shy talk about Asgar. He does not speak of Asgar as lost. On the contrary, he says he is certain he will return to the true fold—my own opinion being that Asgar is absolutely at the mercy of circumstance. We all are—yes; but he much more so than most men. A single and apparently trifling incident may change the whole course of his future as he himself at present perceives it—or rather fails to perceive it; and he may end as an even madder extremist than he is, or he may come to mere humdrum conventionalism, a wife, and an intelligent interest in rates and taxes.

If we were boys again I should like to punch his head and settle the whole thing

in that thoroughly English and satisfactory way. As he is a man, and has got beyond the wholesome age of the bluggy nose, he is a bit of an ass, scared at himself, frightened of the visions in his own head—having Father Strauss as the Old Man of the Sea on his back. What Asgar wants is a sensible good wife. He has boxed the compass of things which the human race has found impossible. He has tried lawlessness and celibacy, and has failed in both. Now he is playing the rôle of Brilliant Failure, and he will fail in that too. I am looking for the woman who shall restore him to sanity.

I pity her; but soon or late she is bound to appear on the scene. She will be a martyr, but he will never—not to the end of their chapter—allow himself to understand that. Neither will she be perfect, but she will see that her lord's spiritual

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tranquillity depends on his believing that she is, and she will move heaven and earth to keep up the deception.

That is my programme for Asgar, and I shall stick to it until—I mean unless—he slinks back to the Annunciation to swing the incense, carry the cross in their processions, and worry Colonel Loyd and the Church Association. . . .

XIII

ASGAR again disappeared from Drum. His mother offered Haig a sad-smiling apology ; and the rector was discreetly silent.

On a creamy, still, restricted day Haig went out walking alone.

He was strolling idly along a footpath through a potato-field when he saw a girlish figure standing at a stile which gave access to the highroad.

Her arms were uplifted ; she was holding a bundle on the stile. Haig made no sound, and the girl did not see him till he was close to her. Then she stood on one side to let him pass, looking at him frankly.

She interested him at once, because of

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her prettiness, the arresting beauty of her figure, her fine reticence of sex.

"Shall I help you carry your parcel?" he said, feeling more shy than his friends would have believed had he told them.

"No, thank you," she answered.

Her voice was low and musical.

Haig got through the stile. He turned on the other side, and spoke to her again. He smiled now, and coloured a little.

"You'd better let me carry it for you. You look tired. Which way are you going?"

"This way."

"Oh, towards Drum. So am I. You really look rather fatigued," he said, putting his hand on the bundle. "If you will get through I will hold it. A tiring day."

She stood beside him. She was quite self-possessed. As she looked up at him, the sun in her face, he noticed how pure was the blue of her eyes.

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"May I carry it?"

"You are very kind."

Haig lifted the bundle off the stile, and they went on together down the white glaring road. He felt that he was walking with a child. They came to some foxglove, and there were red poppies.

"Would you mind waiting a minute?" she said.

He stopped while she gathered a handful of the flowers.

Yes: she was perfectly made; an ideal feminine type. She must be intelligent; a stupid girl would have been laughing self-consciously; she had not even smiled. A touch of sadness gave character to her face.

They went on.

'Thank you—I will take it now," she said when they came to a foot-bridge on the confines of the Drum estate.

[REDACTED]

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But Haig did not give it up.

"Are you going through Seven Acres' Wood?"

"Yes."

"Then I will carry it a little farther."

He crossed the bridge before her ; it looked shaky, and he wished to give her confidence. He found himself taking a surprising interest in her.

They came upon an old woodman at work ; he threw down his axe, hastened to them, and took Haig's companion by both hands.

"Lord-a-mussy, Bessie dear, I never belest to see you livin' in the flesh again, whole and alive, lookin' bonnier than ever ! "

"Thank you, Mr. Dean, I am quite well."

"You look it too ! My ! what awful thoughts we've had — and your poor mother'll be that happy at the sight of

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you ! Now I daresay," said the woodman,
"you've a pretty tale to tell."

Haig, in a consternation, moved on, thinking it not well that more should be said. He devoutly hoped that Asgar was a thousand miles away, and that he would not come back till something had been done.

There were two roads when they got out of the wood : one led up a hill, the other to the drive.

"I am much obliged to you," the girl said, holding out her hands for the bundle.

"So you are Miss Bessie Ticehurst ?" he said, giving it to her.

"Yes."

She regarded him steadfastly.

"My name is Haig," he said. "I am staying at Drum. Do you go up the hill?"

"Yes," she answered ; and left him.

XIV

AND now Mrs. Asgar turned match-maker.

"We must do all we can to get Luke and Bessie married," she said to Haig and the rector at breakfast. "The girl's reasons for going away are scarcely convincing," she added.

"She is evidently concealing something from us," Mr. Tarpath observed.

He seemed to think that the girl should have confessed rather more than the truth, by way of making amends for her "most extraordinary conduct."

"As to that, it will be better not to press her too closely," said Mrs. Asgar. "Let us try to forget the past: I am sure nothing is wrong—nothing really serious. But she

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is unsettled, her mother is anxious, and I am assured that Luke will make her a good husband. It appears, moreover, that she more than half promised to be his wife."

Haig decided to let the innocents have their way—if they could. He would not betray Asgar's confidence. But this was another matter, and his sympathies were strongly with Mrs. Asgar. Yet he could not help wondering how she might act were she to learn the truth.

The pony carriage was brought round after breakfast, and Mrs. Asgar set out for Mrs. Ticehurst's cottage, Haig accompanying her on foot. The pace was so tantalisingly slow that he said—

"Do you never use a whip, Mrs. Asgar?"

"Oh no; Rosa would be very much offended."

Haig laughed. "But she is dragging you into the ditch!"

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"It is a charming morning," said Mrs. Asgar, looking up at the young man from under her large sun-bonnet, "and we are in no hurry."

They came presently upon a gamekeeper taking a poacher to the lock-up.

"I am pained and surprised, Thomas," Mrs. Asgar said to the gamekeeper. "You would not have done such a thing had Mr. Asgar been alive. Please release him."

"I've a bed-ridden wife and ten children, my lady," the poacher whimpered.

"Liar!" Thomas said under his breath.

"What did you say, Thomas? I don't like people to mutter to themselves."

"He's only got a little gell, mem."

"Yes, I know; but the poor thing is a cripple, and his wife is a hardworking woman. You ought to be ashamed of yourself for telling untruths. But you may go this time

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—though you ought to be punished in some way—and tell your wife, please, that I shall call and see her to-morrow. If I could trust you I would give you something for her, but I cannot place any confidence in a person who does not speak the truth."

"If you was to give me a shillin', my lady, I'd take home fresh eggs for the pore cripple."

"Well, I will give you a shilling."

Haig kept behind to hide his levity; Thomas's face was too much for him. It struck him that if devils were driven out of the poacher-swine they ran down a steep place into the gamekeeper. "Never mind, Thomas," he whispered as the pony ambled on, "you can take it out of the brute's jacket when you catch him again."

Haig stood sentinel by the pony while Mrs. Asgar was in the cottage. "Aren't you ashamed of yourself," he growled at Rosa,

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"you lazy old hag?" She eyed him with humility, and kept peering through the garden gate as if saying to herself, "This is purgatory, and I don't know what I've done to deserve it."

When Mrs. Asgar came out of the cottage, Bessie's mother accompanied her. She was in tears, and Haig turned away. Bessie remained invisible.

"I am beginning to fear there will be no wedding after all," Mrs. Asgar said. "But we must not despair. I have been thinking," she added inconsequently, "that Edward may have gone back to the Brotherhood."

"He may," Haig said.

"There can be no doubt of Luke's love for Bessie, and she may learn to return his great affection in time.—Oh, Rosa, don't stop to listen; you can't understand our troubles.—She respects him, and is touched by his fidelity. But there is some obstacle :



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I cannot make her out; she is very much changed in manner."

"Perhaps she is looking a little higher than a gardener," Haig suggested.

"Oh, she is not an ambitious girl. It is a question of personal feeling. I see no sign of pride in her: she cried when I told her how Luke had suffered. That shows a good heart. And then there is the conflict of minds; Bessie is more intelligent, more refined than Luke, and I can see that she has ideas of her own. But Luke is so gentle, and patient, and unselfish; entirely worthy of her, if moral worthiness were all."

"In these matters it isn't—always," Haig said.

"I remember," Mrs. Asgar went on, "reading an unfortunate, foolish book about a woman who was continually talking about living her life in her own way. She blundered terribly, as people usually do when

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they say they are going to do things in a new way. Bessie reminds me of that woman; but—oh—with a difference! A very great difference! Her self-possession is such that I have no fear of her doing anything rash. She is more likely to allow her ideas to lead her to unhappiness than to error. Bessie," said Mrs. Asgar impressively, "has a fine conscience. And she has character. Indeed, Mr. Haig, I felt quite timid in her presence just now, though I have known her all her life."

The autumn prelude began; and Asgar did not return. Bessie avoided Luke, and the humdrum slow-witted fellow sank into a profounder melancholy. Having a fatalistic taint, he seemed to account for Bessie's coldness as a just punishment for some indefinite shortcomings of his own. Luke was not a passionate lover, and apparently he found a subtle joy in being miserable.

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"Luke is a model of delicate feeling," Mrs. Asgar said. "You must have seen how careful he is not to obtrude his presence upon Bessie. If Edward were to come home, he might help them to understand each other better. And Bessie is a discerning young woman, and the value of a sincere affection must soon or late be borne in upon her. No, no; we must not despair of seeing them happily married."

But for the looming shadow of Asgar the whole thing would have been comedy to Haig. This obscure girl now seemed to him to be a greater menace to the peace of Drum than were all those other perturbations about Geneva, and Canterbury, and Rome.



XV

HAIG, in a mood that might have been more devout, went to church one Sunday; social feeling enticing him thither, mainly. In these shortening days the evening service was held in the afternoon, to save candles and oil, there being no gas at Drum.

As Haig was late, he went into the first vacant place he came to. Children were in the pew, in the pews before and behind, and they stopped singing to take stock of him. He bent down and asked a little girl if he might look on her book: she dropped it instantly on the floor, turned her eyes into two round Os, and others began to giggle. Haig shook his head, looked extremely

solemn, and two wee lassies clasped each other round the neck, smothering their merriment. Haig was glad that the choir were blessed with stout lungs.

During the prayers, instead of trying to make a catalogue of his sins, he looked about the church for Bessie.

She was kneeling on the opposite side of the nave. Luke knelt behind her. With the girl was her mother.

It did not seem as though Luke was paying an absorbed attention to what the parson was reading out of the big book with the brass clasps ; Haig's impression was that the rueful lover's thoughts were nearer earth. Haig thanked his stars that he was not overwhelmingly serious ; human life was so colourless, altogether an inadequate business, without humour.

Afterwards, on the road, Haig spoke to Luke, who told him that boys had been

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stoning the black cat running wild in the woods.

"I've tried to feed it," he said, "because Mr. Asgar did, but it won't come near the Deaf Tower now. It do want Mr. Asgar. Have you his address, sir? I would wish to send him the news of his white dog, how it's getting on, also Bessie being home. He'd be pleased to hear, for he was full of thought of her as well as me."

"Just so," Haig said. "Yes, to be sure. But I don't think I'd write to him just yet, Luke, if I were you. He will know in good time—supposing Mrs. Asgar has not told him already. Hullo! there is Bessie with her mother. They have some way to go. Why don't you see them home, Luke?"

But Luke sighed, and shook his head drearily.

"It's not me she wants, sir."

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"Oh, but you shouldn't hug the miserables in that fashion, Luke."

"It was to be, sir, and I'm not the one to complain, except when I'm spoke to. Then my heart bursts."

"My experience," said Haig, "is that ladies like to be wooed determinedly."

"Your experience of the ladies, sir, don't count. She's not the same." Gazing after her: "She touched me with her back," said Luke, "when she rose off her knees in church, and I'll never forget it—never. It's only since she came home that she's gone so distant from me. She can make my throat dry up like ashes, and my heart stop, by only lookin' at me with her eyes. I've not heard a word from her since she came back, but if she was to speak to me——"

And Luke crawled away.

XVI

BESSIE was nevertheless won over—if not by Luke, then by Mrs. Asgar and the rector.

Mrs. Asgar, telling Haig, was quite happy in her amazing innocence. But Mr. Tarpath looked doubtful, and a little ashamed.

Haig never knew how it had been accomplished, nor cared to inquire. He had seen something of match-making. But this was a new aspect of the business.

It would have been absurd to suspect undue influence. For here was Mrs. Asgar beamingly proud of her share in this strange matrimonial enterprise; and she fixed the wedding for the first Tuesday in October.

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They were really old sweethearts (said she), and had formerly "walked out." She ordered a pretty gown for Bessie, another—of more substantial sort—for her mother, the wedding-cake, and a marvellous pink tie and a pair of gloves for Luke.

Should Edward return (the old lady rambled on), she would get him to give the bride away, and should he not come in time, perhaps Mr. Haig might like to undertake this pleasing and graceful office.

Haig shrivelled up at the bare suggestion, and Mrs. Asgar did not press it. She made him promise, however, that he would accompany her to the wedding; and Haig speculated as to what might happen meanwhile.

"I feel as if I were getting to the end of an interesting story," Mrs. Asgar said. "You know what I mean, Mr. Haig. Your eyes are a little tired, for you have been

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reading on and on, to see how it is going to end—not liking to turn to the last chapter—hoping that all the kind people will be happy at last, and that the bad people will be mercifully punished. And then the final chapter is reached, and peace reigns, and everything is as you would wish it to be, and you smile to yourself with gratitude as you put down the book, feeling that you cannot rest till you have advised your friends to read it. I am so fond of a happy ending, Mr. Haig."

"Yet, now and then," Haig was mean enough to say (smiling his apology), "a life does seem to begin and end wholly without explanation."

Mrs. Asgar looked at him benignly over her eye-glasses.

"You must not be among the faithless," she said.

The wedding was to take place in the

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early morning, and Mrs. Asgar set out for the church in the basket-carriage, drawn by the incomparable Rosa. She looked very happy and radiant in her silver-gray gown, Indian shawl, and big white straw bonnet done up with cornflowers and marguerites, and fastened under her chin with tremendous blue ribbons.

Haig walked by her side; and—"It took me *quite* half-an-hour to dress myself this morning," she confided to him in a mysterious voice.

She liked to say these awful things, to make him laugh. He laughed now, and told her he had bothered nearly as long as that over his necktie.

"Please turn this way," she said. "Why, it is a real wedding necktie! You must have sent to Imberminster for it. I am glad you are taking so much interest in Luke's happiness."

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Luke meanwhile was in the vestry, huddled on a chair in the remotest corner he could find, a heart-broken bridegroom. Mr. Tarpath's surplice hung near him from a peg ; it seemed as though poor Luke had sought its shelter : that, he fancied, perhaps, was better than nothing.

In the churchyard people were gathered together in groups, whispering awesomely. They nudged each other when Mrs. Asgar appeared round the bend of the road in her pony-coach.

"A new bonnet," said one ; "I've never seen her in them ribbons before."

"She do look nice," said another. "What a fine complexion for her age—fit for a gell almost. And Mr. Haig's put on his Sunday clothes."

"I wonder she's come," said a third. "I'll go and tell her, to save her leaving her carriage."

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Rosa stopped of her own accord at the churchyard gate.

A man leaned over the wall and said Bessie was lost again, and couldn't be found nowhere.

Then Mr. Tarpath came from the church and spoke to Mrs. Asgar and Haig. Mrs. Asgar mournfully put her nosegay of white flowers under the carriage seat.

"Please assure Luke of my deepest sympathy," she said to the rector. "Oh—give him my love."

She turned Rosa's head towards Drum.

"So there is to be no happy ending after all, Mr. Haig," she said presently; and the rest of the homeward journey was made in silence.

XVII

HAIG after this grew more and more uneasy; for plainly worse remained. Bessie puzzled him: his insight had been at fault; there were baffling complexities in her character too. Surely Father Strauss could not have been at work?

No: he blamed Asgar.

But Asgar was not at Drum. He might indeed have returned, making again the Deaf Tower his quarters.

Was Bessie there also? This seemed incredible; and if she were, then the next surprise would bring a deeper grief to Drum.

The simple country folk, the next day, and for many days, were in the grip of a murmurous terror. The cottage doors were

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locked and barred at nightfall ; the children were sent earlier to bed ; the throb of superstition was in the air, as though some invisible monster were prowling to and fro seeking whom next he might devour. Sensible, level-headed Mrs. Asgar even seemed to give herself to the common awe, though she made no mention of her fears to any one.

"The girl may be capricious," she said, "and I am sorry to find myself wondering if she is so good as we think. But I am apprehensive of there being another mystery somewhere — something more than mere caprice."

"What does Mrs. Ticehurst say?"

"Poor woman! she can say nothing. Bessie had not been in bed that night. The bed was just as it had been made ; there was no evidence of a struggle—her mother would of course have heard it had there been. I went into the room ; everything was neat

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and tidy, as one would expect where Bessie lived. Her wedding gown was lying over a chair, the veil on the top of it, covered with the tissue paper in which it had been sent home. And—this is very strange, Mr. Haig—a prayer-book was on the table, open at the Marriage Service, as if the poor girl had been reading it. I could suppose her there; she seemed to be on her knees—oh, I hope we have not been over-anxious in this. There is always a danger, when one tries to make people happy, of making others unhappy; we all depend so much on each other, down to the smallest things. It saddened me, when I examined the open book and saw two or three blurred spots, to think that perhaps Bessie had been weeping over it," Mrs. Asgar said, emotion in her voice. "I looked out of the window, where there is a large bed of thyme, then a gravel path; so there were no footprints to

show whether any one had been to the window."

"How did Mrs. Ticehurst find it?"

"Shut. But the catch was not drawn; so that it may have been shut after Bessie got out. Both doors were locked, the keys being in the locks on the inside. Mrs. Ticehurst remembers fastening the window of her daughter's room on the previous evening."

Haig asked if the girl had been receiving letters of late.

"Her mother says not. I was careful to inquire; she must have thought me very inquisitive. It would scarcely have been possible for her to carry on a clandestine correspondence. I hope," said Mrs. Asgar, "we have not been doing the girl an ill service by remaining silent about her former disappearance."

XVIII

HAIG, in the desire to chill his excitement, went forth in the dusk. He smoked his favourite brier-root; and the quiet evening farther helped him to keep his feelings in order.

No one was to be seen: the day's work was at an end, and the doors were shut on the night. The moon came up, dishevelled in clouds: Haig could not avoid looking at it, yet wished it would put on the clownish visage which it sometimes assumes to its own poetic undoing. He was not really in a bad temper. But he hated these recurring mystifications.

It was a companionable sort of night that had spread upon the great clean earth,

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full of lulling sounds and the enchantment of starlight. The air was sharp and pure, making the eyes tingle.

He stood awhile in the garden beside an ancient stone lion draped with purple creepers, and noted how black the flowers appeared in the moonlight. His mind was more active than his body.

Was the great god Pan here? Ey!—poor old chap; he might be sniffing Haig's cigar. "What does he think of us all, I'd like to know? If he would make himself visible, and dress like a Christian—or a neopagan—I shouldn't mind taking him to a London music-hall. He'd be enchanted with the only Yvette." A night bird began a solo; Haig didn't think much of it, and strolled on meditatively.

Presently the Deaf Tower rose solemn in the moonlight; and Haig crammed through a hedge into the park.



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He climbed the hill towards the tower. It stood black and grand ; not the faintest speck of light was visible in it. The thing had an unholy fascination ; Haig confessed this and abhorred the sensation.

If Asgar had returned to it, he must be either hiding in the dark or have taken the precaution to obscure the windows.

Haig, in any event, was resolved to go up and see.

It was a pretty stiff ascent. The turf was smooth and slippery. But he was in no hurry.

When about half-way up he stopped to listen ; the silence was being broken by screams. The cries were horrible to hear, and he experienced a positive physical relief when they ceased : they were so like the screaming of a child. Soon, however, they began again, the same piercing, wailing notes of pain, rending the peaceful beauty

of the night. Haig, satisfied that the screams came from some wounded animal in the wood, trudged upward. "That black cat, no doubt."

He made southward of the tower, and was startled to see that there was a light in it after all. From where Haig now stood the tower had the appearance of an immense shadow projected from the sky. The light shone from a small window near the top, and it could not, owing to the southward aspect of the window, have been visible from the house.

Haig concluded that Asgar had returned ; he moved along to the tower. He was within a stone's throw of the door when he saw a man come from it. The door had been cautiously opened and shut ; Haig heard no sound.

The man glided silently across the grassy slope, a fantastic figure in the broken pallid

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light. Haig failed to recognise him, but shivered to think it was Asgar, deformed. The man was walking somewhat rapidly in a north-easterly direction, and he was carrying something.

Haig ran down the hill.

“Asgar!” he called.

The man stood still, turned his face to the moonlight, and Haig recognised Luke.

XIX

HE was drenched from head to foot in a mournful submissiveness. But Haig discerned nothing crafty in his manner.

If Luke was a double-dealer, he performed the job very skilfully. He was neither ill at ease nor resentful at being discovered: simply broken in spirit, a sorrowful rag of a man.

But what was he doing at the Deaf Tower? Had it been Asgar—or even Bessie—Haig would have been less surprised.

“You don’t often go to the tower at this late hour, Luke?”

“Not oft, sir.”

“What have you there?”

“A parcel, sir,” Luke replied, his eyes on the ground

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"Oh! And I see you've been carrying water for Mr. Asgar."

This made Luke lift his eyes as high as Haig's chest.

"Yes, sir. But I thought I was the only one that knew the young master had come home."

"I am a very old friend of Mr. Asgar's, you know," Haig said cheerfully. "You're going for more water?"

"No, sir; I've took all he wants. He bade me," said Luke simply, "not to say to nobody he'd come home. He'll be wanting to give his dear mother—which God bless her——"

"Amen," murmured Haig.

"—a pleasant fright in the morning when he drops in upon her."

"Yes; that's Mr. Asgar's pleasant way," Haig observed. "But how did you come to know he was in the tower?"

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"Through me being on the wander in the park. It's because of what was to have been."

"Ah! that 'was to have been'!" sighed Haig, not wholly insincere, since he really pitied this woebegone lover.

"It's easier to bear out of doors; you can bring her back better to your thought then. But she do seem so far away and lost in a room, and books is no comfort."

"Not much, I grant," said Haig, consolingly.

"You can't see their meaning when she's swimming in front of your eyes on the very page where she's not named. You can't believe nothing of the print. It's far more comforting in the open, where the stars and moon look friendly, and I've felt I might be took as well, like her, if it's the evil one that's done it."

"But weren't you afraid, Luke?"

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"Oh no, sir ; I've been on the watch for him, and he's mistook if he thinks I'd run. I'd say to him, 'What have you done with her? Me as well!' Ay, I'd not shrink from the challenge, if it was ever so. What I want is to be where she is, if it's the bad place or the good—not that I believe it's the bad ; they couldn't, *dursent* keep her there."

"You must keep up your heart, Luke. After all, Bessie's not the only girl in the world."

"She's the only one for me," said Luke. He bent his head lower ; the moonlight drank up his sigh. "Mebbe there's more like her, but none the same to me."

"Mr. Asgar is quite well?" Haig remarked carelessly.

"I donna for that, sir : his face not being clear in the dark."

"But there is a light in the tower?"

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"I never saw one. Where?" Luke glanced round. "It's in darkness."

"Oh yes; quite so. You saw him in the lower room?"

"He knocked on the window when I was passing, and when I went up, he was at the door."

Luke stood silent awhile.

"The young master's his own trouble, sir, whatever it may be. It was as if his hair was perfect white—all over the ears here—and I hardly knew his voice for the same. I told him about Bessie, and nobody could have been kinder than him; he took hold on my hands—the first time I've known him to do it like that. His kindness broke me down more than before. 'We must have done something, you and me, Luke,' he said, 'in another life, to be afflicted so.' He said it, I suppose, sir, for lack of other words. He was the same in his kind

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ways to me when she was spirited out of our sight before."

"We all sympathise with you, Luke. And so—it was to fetch him some water that he called you to the tower?"

"Not that first, but because of the screaming of the black cat in the wood. He said it made him sick to hear it, and he sent me to the wood to see if I could find the poor thing. I couldn't; it must have been scared at me, and grew quiet when I got near its hiding-place. He thinks it's been shot or caught in a trap, and he was vexed because I couldn't find it, and made my stomach turn from his angry words—but he was soon kind again, and sent me for a pail of fresh water from the well in the mead garden."

"What's that you are holding in your other hand?" Haig asked.

"Mr. Asgar's gold watch and chain."

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Luke raised his hand. "His own gold watch
and chain!"

"What are you going to do with it?"

"It's his wedding gift," the depressed
bridegroom said. "I offered him not to
take it—not looking forward to a wedding
now—but he forced me, saying he'd not
want it."

Haig for a moment held his breath.
Was this then to be the last night!
And if Bessie was in the Deaf Tower,
what was to be her fate? . . .
He abruptly bade Luke good-night, and
went on to the tower.

XX

WHEN he was come to it, he felt as though he were standing in the shadow of some gigantic tomb. What was still more vivid to him was his utter helplessness. He raised his hand mechanically in the darkness; it symbolised his mental state—this was all he could do.

He turned his eyes down the hill, and having made sure that Luke was out of sight, he pressed close to the door and listened.

The Halls of Death could not have been more silent. Not a breath, not a murmur, not the faintest sound broke the stillness.

Then he knocked—and it was like knocking at the doors of space. Next he tried

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to peer in at a window, but the blind was down; nothing could be seen. He knocked again, louder than before; but not the slightest movement within or without gave answer to his summons.

Haig then walked round the tower to the southern side, to see if the light was still there. It was not; the gaunt looming structure was in absolute darkness.

But Haig saw a thing that made his back shiver—Asgar at the window where the light had been.

Asgar! and yet . . . He stood motionless: a gray ghost in the moonlight, or a man standing upright in his coffin.

Haig glanced over his shoulder, almost expecting to find some spectral presence there. When he looked up at the window again the face was gone.



XXI

HAIG, who was mannerly enough to assume respect for observances regarded as sacred, took his place between his hostess and Mr. Tarpeth at family prayers that night at Drum.

Asgar might be wrestling with the immortal terrors in the solitude of the Deaf Tower ; and Bessie—but he shuddered to think of her. It was much more pleasant to be here, in this soft candle-glow, among these simple people who were glad to be alive and did not try to open the pages of the Divine counsel.

Mrs. Asgar's custom was to have the Bible read through, from beginning to end, at morning and evening prayers ; this was

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done in about a year and a half: then it was begun again. The old housekeeper could tell how many times it had been read through; but Mrs. Asgar did not like to keep count, saying it reproached her for learning so little.

Often, and especially when they came to the Psalms, the servants were fond of watching their aged mistress as she sat reading her share with her eyes shut and her beautiful white hands folded on the book. No criticism was allowed: not even by that irreproachable theologian, Mr. Tarpath.

On this particular evening a long chapter in the book of the prophet Jeremiah was read, and Haig could scarce keep his voice steady when he came to the words: "*A drought is upon her waters, and they shall be dried up: for it is the land of graven images, and they are mad upon their idols.*"

After prayers Mrs. Asgar bade her guests

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and her servants good-night, and nothing was seen of her again till she came into the drawing-room for prayers next morning.

As Haig's hand lingered in hers to-night, he saw her not only as a good woman but as the mother who was keeping many sad things hid in her heart—the mother of one child, and that child gone all wrong in the pitiable intoxication of emotion. He could not tell her that her son was at the tower; he was ashamed to look in her eyes.

Haig went with her up the stair. On the first landing Mrs. Asgar took one of the candles from the maid and gave it to him. She would have deemed it discourteous to her guest to suffer a servant to perform this office.

"Good-night, Mr. Haig."

"You used to call me Arthur, Mrs. Asgar."

"But you were a boy then."

[REDACTED]

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"I wish you could think of me as a boy
still."

He raised her hand to kiss it. But she would not let him, and putting it on his shoulder, drew him gently down to her and pressed her lips to his cheek.

"Good-night, Arthur," she said.

And Haig, touched to the quick, went to his room in a confusion of wretchedness.



XXII

THE blind was down ; a slight wind fluttered it ; Haig pulled it up and stood by the open window.

Just under him was a high terrace, ivy swarming over the edges of it. The old house rambled this way and that : an agile person might have clambered over it without much risk.

The night, lovelier than dreams, brooded upon the gardens, the mead valley, the swelling vague bosoms of the park.

Haig sat on a chair by the window and let his eyes wander to the Deaf Tower. It was like an awful thought in the lunar whiteness—the embodiment, the expression of crime. No light was visible in it.

[REDACTED]

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Haig despised himself for letting these morbid feelings get in upon him ; they were not in his line (said he to himself) : yet what could he do ?

" I feel as if my hands were tied behind my back—I can do nothing ! "

His conscience accused him of indecision, of weakness, of moral cowardice even : but not of intention. He would have done anything ; but what was there he could do ? His feeling was precisely that which a man has while watching hopeless by a death-bed.

He could not get rid of the idea of calamity. Sad memories awoke in him : pleasant memories too—which soon became sad also. The futility of a life like Asgar's oppressed him with a kind of physical suffocation.

And the dear old mother was lying down to sleep ! Haig tried imaginatively to rob her of her thoughts, for his own mental

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appeasement. But this was beyond him ; he only got as far as a contrast that shocked and appalled him.

There was a way of peace ; there might be many ways ; old Mrs. Asgar was in one of them—to this Haig came, inspiration failing to carry him farther.

He smiled rather grimly ; one might try to encourage oneself, anyhow ; then he began to write in pencil a letter to his sister. He wrote rapidly ; the words rushed upon each other helter-skelter.

A clock chimed eleven. On a sudden Haig tore up the paper and threw the bits under his chair.

Was Mrs. Asgar asleep yet ?

How still the house was !

Would it come with the dawn—this horrible thing that was in the air ?

He shivered as he got up and walked about the room.

Would Luke go to the tower in the morning?

Would Asgar send him for more water?

And Bessie . . . and Father Strauss. . . .

Haig took off his coat and his collar and tie. It would be better to go to bed and sleep on this bewilderment—supposing he could sleep. He felt very wide awake, and yet benumbed: thank goodness the night was warm; he wished he had had a drop of brandy among his things. Perhaps there was; he rummaged, and discovered an empty flask.

Yes; he would get into bed; they scented the bedclothes with lavender at Drum—delightful old custom; it made one feel young again, getting in between lavender-smelling sheets; everybody was young at Drum—except Asgar.

Haig pulled down the window, but did not trouble to fasten it; he kept the blind up.



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It occurred to him that he would like to read something—something stormy, entralling, about strong men, men of iron will, who did desperate things grandly, turning neither to the right nor the left—men who hacked and hewed their own course and never bothered themselves about theology and priests and the Perfect Woman and balderdash of that sort!

Some books were in a corner: Blair, Jeremy Taylor, Ken; the likeliest volume he could find was a copy in French of Madame d'Aulnoy's fairy-tales.

Well, he would try that; and so hauling off the rest of his clothes, he took it to bed with him.

He hoisted his shoulders well up on the pillows, set the candle on a lower pillow, and began to read about the frog prince. It was stupider than he could have believed; or perhaps he had grown out of



[REDACTED]

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fairy-tales ; if this were so (he was candid enough to confess to himself), it was time indeed to repent and mend his ways.

He forced himself to go on. But the thing was meaningless, silly ; he simply could not get into the spirit of it ; not even the tremendous transformation of the frog, in circumstances which Mrs. Grundy would have deemed highly improper, made the slightest impression on him. So he let the book fall on a chair, blew out the candle, and rolled over on his side.

He shut his eyes and promised himself that he would be asleep in a few minutes. A good many minutes passed. He heard the midnight hour striking ; sleep continued to give him the slip.

He grew nervous, angry, and began to think again of Madame d'Aulnoy's frog prince. He tried to fix his wandering thoughts on this and that, on running sheep,

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on green fields, on moving clouds, and other child's play of the excited mind ; but all in vain.

He had just irritably pulled the counterpane over his head, when he heard a noise at the window, and turned round quickly to see what had happened.

The window was open ; the lower sash had been thrown up.

A man was standing there, his bare head and broad shoulders clearly outlined in the moonlight. He was not looking into the room, but apparently over upon the garden.

Haig threw aside the clothes and got out of bed.

"Hullo, old chap!" he said. "This is another of your surprises!"

XXIII

ASGAR did not at once speak. He remained passive at the window, his back to it.

Haig set about getting on his clothes ; he knew that Asgar had a dramatic mind, else this odd visit might have startled him.

"Aha, I'm glad you've come. I couldn't get to sleep—for thinking of my sins."

"See there, Haig ! "

Haig went to the window.

"What is it ?"

"Luke in the garden ! I saw him from the tower. He is dreaming of the woman who is as far from him as the stars !"

"Poor devil," said Haig. "Upon my word," he added gaily, "it's awful rot this about the one and only woman. I don't

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believe in Miss Nonsuch, and I'm hanged if I'd lay in a stock of bronchitis and rheumatism for the handsomest woman living. The Only Woman is such a tyrant!"

He sat on the window-ledge close to Asgar. The situation had been darkly contrived, and Haig was in dismay touching the management of it.

"I hope you've a safe footing out there, old chap."

"Oh yes; I have often got into the house this way. There—he is among the laurels now!"

Asgar laughed. His face had a greenish shine. Haig hoped he would not repeat that queer laugh.

"As I stood watching him from the tower—I saw you too: saw you shut the window—I felt disembodied, as if I were looking at myself from a distance."

"I've never felt like that," Haig said;

[REDACTED]

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"and don't want to. What's the good of a fellow trying to have a peep at his own soul before he's kicked the bucket? I'm not sure if it isn't blasphemous. You're very foolish, Asgar, to let this stuff get into your brain. For myself, it takes me all my time to keep decently straight, without bothering about a possible second Haig. If there is a second, I don't want to know the beast—let him look after himself!"

Asgar, still gazing over the garden, said, "He is drowning himself in the vision of her!"

"I hope he won't finish up by drowning himself in the well," Haig replied. "By the way, has the absurd man any chance of finding his beloved Bessie?"

"Perhaps not—as you understand. But he loves her, and will dream, and be happy."

"I should get hungry," said Haig with
M

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levity aforethought, "and look out for Bessie number two."

"Dreams! It comes to the same thing," said Asgar. "Nothing is worth having, I suppose."

"Only we want it," observed Haig.

"Yes; that is the unfathomable mystery of it all."

"No mystery in the least to me," said Haig. "When I want this or that particular thing, I try to get it, and if I can't, well, there's an end, and I don't kick up a row. When I was a child my nurse used to spank me for howling for the moon, and I've never forgotten the lesson. It seems to me there's a lot of grown-up kids who stand in need of that style of straightening out."

"Poor Luke! he is so elemental," Asgar said.

"Now there I'm not at one with you—if

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I rightly understand what you mean," said Haig. "He strikes me as being abominably self-conscious. In other words, I should say he's an infernal ass."

"He has his vision—"

"Good heavens, man, that's simply a torment to him," Haig cried. "It's as pathetically comic as that car business—what-d'ye-call-it — where the miserable sinners rejoice to be squashed to a jelly."

Asgar leaned heavily on the windowsill ; his side came in contact with Haig's elbow.

"A man can only regard life from his own standpoint. Nobody can help him, or understand when, or by what means, he has come to a full stop. You are altogether wrong, Haig, if you think you can do anything for me."

"I was speaking of Luke, old chap."

"No ; you were speaking about me—and

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very pointedly. I took it all in ; I have turned it over in my mind often. You mean well ; I'm not ungrateful."

He made a sudden affectionate movement, just touching Haig's hand, and immediately withdrawing his own, as though resolved to have nothing more to do with human sympathy.

"We may approach too near to our ideal. Then there is a crumbling—darkness—ashes fall from the sky. Oh, if one could get a sign from heaven!—a new sign of a new immortality! But the full stop is there, and the eye can see nothing beyond. And the ashes begin to fall—and it is better to crawl in somewhere out of the way, and make an end of it."

Haig said to himself, "There's a revolver in his pocket!"

Nevertheless he forced a laugh, and grew sick at heart in the same moment.

"Of course we can't always be happy," he said tritely. "Father Strauss has been to Drum. . . . You'll catch your death of cold out there, without anything on your head. When did you come home?"

"Just in time——" Asgar fell silent.

"Your mother has been very anxious about you. We have had more trouble during your absence. Bessie came back, you know—you'll be glad to know—and she and Luke are to be married."

"No, no!"

"I mean, they were to have been married. We were all at the church. But Bessie had disappeared again in the night."

"It was the last night! I have told you: I came back just in time. There is nothing to regret."

Asgar, turning, leaned on his elbows on the window-sill, staring past Haig into the room. His attitude did not suggest physical

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exhaustion: rather, utter spiritual languor: the corruption of the moral fibre, the breakdown of the desire of being. He could not have seen anything in the room, for the candle had not been lighted. Yet he seemed to be gazing at something that was terribly vivid to him in the darkness.

"I don't know if you would care for some of my books or pictures, Haig. You can select anything you like."

He was come then to this pass! Haig weakly pretended not to understand.

"What are you talking about, old chap?"

"I am on the step," he answered, "and when the door opens I shall not run away. I can see now that I have never been anything else in the world but the guest of chance. Nothing seems to hold me for long!"

[REDACTED]

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"Oh, we're all like that, more or less," Haig said cheerily.

"The finish will be clearer than it might have been. You think of it, and that wonderful silence fascinates you. I ask myself—Is Destiny a thing, and shall we move in its haunted chambers? No use asking either: we are asking all our lives, and get no answer. And then I had one grand stroke of luck at the last!—my coming back at the right moment. She was saying her prayers when I went to her window. Not a second did she hesitate; love leapt to her eyes at the sight of me. She told me she had been praying for me. Her wedding gown lay over a chair—the white veil—the orange blossom. I tell you, Haig, had she been arrayed for that poor dullard down there she would have gone with me all the same! She couldn't help herself! . . . She bade me go, and came to me in

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the meadow behind the garden. She was like a bird in my arms ; her heart — her heart !—I thought it would break, Haig, it crashed so upon my breast. She confessed her love ; she had always loved me ; there could be no end to it !”

XXIV

HAIG asked eagerly "Where is she *now*?"

"I tell you she remains radiant white in her innocence! She loves me, and that for me is the one absolute truth in the whole world! But her soul is not hers to surrender. She is the perfect woman, Haig!"

Then—this talk maddening Haig—he said he was going to be blunt, and asked—

"But where the devil is she?"

"I don't know, Haig."

("Thank God!" said Haig under his breath.)

"So she has bolted from you again?"

"She implored me to go. Something she said made me think she was afraid of me. She would go back to shut the window, she

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said. She did shut it; I went to see—for she did not return. I have not seen her since, and I don't know where she may be."

"Have you tried to find her?"

"No, this is the full stop; the ashes have begun to fall."

Asgar, standing clear of the window, looked out again upon the garden.

"And that man loves her too! And he has solace and recompense. I had to touch her to believe; his is the higher faith; if she were to melt in air he would still believe in her and adore her rapturously! Look at him there, moving among *realities*. The gift of illusion has been taken from me; I feel among crashing wreckage; there is a positive quality of badness in me, Haig, and I am going to root it out once for all!"

Haig leaned forward and slipped his hand in Asgar's arm.

"You're nothing like so bad as you

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imagine yourself," he said persuasively. "Upon my word, I've known you do lots of fine things, and I have no knowledge of your having done anything really shabby. Blest if I could say as much for myself!"

"You needn't try to fool me, Haig."

"I'm not; I'm not—I'm perfectly sincere! Man, you're full of good qualities; and if you've also got that 'positive quality of badness,' well, so have I—so has everybody. And if you want me to abuse you I can do it; I should like to riddle you through and through! But I needn't bother to do that. I've been to Imberminster," said Haig, somewhat doubtfully, "and had a long chat with Gurney about you. He's a good fellow; he can't get you out of his head—if I shouldn't say his prayers. Father Strauss came to see your mother; she would rather you . . . They are all expecting you to return to the Annuncia-

tion ; I was told their ritual isn't so stately as when you looked after it." Haig gave a laugh that had in it more pathos than mirth. "And what you have to do now," he went on, "is to get back as fast as you can to that robust common-sense of which I am so admirable an exponent. Then you'll see life in its proper perspective, which is the secret of sanity. Then you'll be able to say resolutely, 'This is a tree, not an elephant ;' 'This is a plain man of the world —this sensible fellow Haig—not a demigod ;' and—similarly of course—'This is a woman, *not* an angel.' Now, my dear chap, don't contemptuously ignore what I've been saying. I can't tell you how serious I feel, because I haven't a serious way of expressing myself. If you weren't such a powerful fellow I'd haul you in through the window and make you go to bed. And—now, after entertaining you with this long and eloquent

speech, you're going to be civil and come in and keep me company over a pipe. I'm dying for one, and it will quieten your nerves too. You aren't quite yourself to-night ; but you'll be all right after a sound sleep."

Asgar stood away from the window, his left side to it : Haig's chatter had apparently made no impression upon him.

"I am going back to the tower," he said.

Haig protested ; and felt bitter with himself for not having made an effort to extract the revolver from his pocket.

"You can't go there to-night!"

But Asgar moved away. Haig pressed forward out of the window and watched him. For a moment the retreating figure seemed to be poised in the air ; then all at once he disappeared.

Presently after, Haig saw him in the garden, going toward the park.

XXV

ASGAR, having for a brief space been out of sight, reappeared on a shoulder of the hill on which the Deaf Tower stood. Awhile he was swallowed up in a cup of the hill where shadow sat. He made once more a ghostly presence in the mystic light, and then seemed to go beyond the tower.

Haig, persuaded that this was to be a night of tragic stress, determined to follow him.

He was about to withdraw into the room to complete his dress fit to go out, when it seemed to him that some one was moving on the ground below. He peered down across the terrace upon the darker spaces there. But he could discern nothing that indicated life.

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It could not have been Luke: he had wandered farther away in the garden, where the stone lions were, in the verdurous place haunted by the great god Pan; he was on a seat, his face in his hands, his back to the park.

Haig felt reassured: this, indeed, was a night to imagine things. He cast a glance at the bowed figure in the distance; then pulled down the blind, and lighted the candle.

He put on a pair of slippers, and had just snatched a tweed cap from his portmanteau when a handful of gravel was thrown at the window.

"Then there was some one there!" Haig said to himself.

He crammed on his cap and went to the window. As he paused listening, a second handful of gravel was flung up.

The blind did not meet, and Haig put

his eye to the vacant line. No one was to be seen—Luke was still on the seat, at least a hundred yards distant.

Haig blew out the candle, so that his silhouette might not be seen at the window, and then cautiously drew up the blind.

He paused a moment, gazing down. There was not the slightest movement; not the faintest sound.

Haig saw a whitish speck against the dark foliage, but he did not think that this could be a human face; more likely it was a cluster of decayed leaves. Yet he fixed his gaze upon it.

"Who is there?" he asked firmly.

"Mr. Haig!"

The voice came up from the ground: it was of thrilling feminine quality. The whitish speck moved, and a figure advanced into the clearer light immediately before the window.

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"Is that you, Miss Ticehurst?"

"Yes, Mr. Haig. Can you see me? I am looking up at you—here—from the garden."

"Oh, I can see you quite plainly," Haig said.

"May I—Mr. Haig—may I speak to you?"

She urged her request breathlessly: her hands were held up in entreaty; her pale eager face, the imploring tremor of her voice, her whole attitude and manner touched Haig strangely.

"Yes, yes—of course!" he said. "Say anything you like to me, Miss Ticehurst. Be quite frank—I shall be glad to be of any service to you."

He had gone down on one knee on the terrace, and was got close to the edge, looking over at her. He remembered the pure blue of her eyes; but they seemed black now. He would have let himself down there and then to her side, by means

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of the ivy, had it not occurred to him that at this strange hour she would wish him to remain where he was.

"I am listening, Miss Ticehurst; I can hear you distinctly. Can you make out what I am saying?"

"Yes, Mr. Haig. Please do not speak loud! Luke is in the garden—over there; I have had to hide from him as well as from Mr. Asgar. I do not want them to know I am here."

She spoke somewhat more calmly. She pointed to a higher gable.

"Mrs. Asgar's window is a little way open——"

Haig barely caught these words; Bessie quickly pressed a corner of her mantle to her mouth, to smother a cough. She appeared to be tired and ill.

"Shall I come down to you, Miss Ticehurst?"

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"If you would be so kind."

"Certainly."

"I am afraid of coughing if I raise my voice," Bessie said. "And oh!—I am so anxious for you to go to Mr. Asgar at once——"

This then was the motive of her belated visit; she too was apprehensive of Asgar's fate, and had once more put her reputation in jeopardy for his sake.

Haig comprehended the state of her mind in an instant, from the vivid summary of it given by her anguished swift glance towards the tower.

"Did you notice where Mr. Asgar got down?"

"Yes; at this end."

Haig stood up. He could scarce discern Bessie now, for a cloud was loitering on the moon's face.

"Will you show me?" he whispered, try-

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ing to send a smile through the gloom.
“I’m not a brilliant burglar.”

“I will go and stand at the place,” she replied.

Haig guided himself along by the wall for some twelve yards. The putting on of slippers, instead of boots, must have been an inspiration, he assured himself. It was well to feel complacent about something.

“Are you there, Miss Ticehurst?”

“Yes. Mr. Asgar came down just here. The wall slopes, and he held on to the ivy. Can I give you any assistance, Mr. Haig?”

“No, thanks,” he said. “You’re a plucky young lady, but I doubt if you could catch me if I were to throw myself upon you. Stand a little farther back, please.”

He tore his jacket and made his hands bleed, but got down without serious hurt. He wiped off the blood and shook hands with her, to let her see that he thought

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none the worse of her because of this unconventional visit. She was evidently touched by his chivalrous bearing.

"What must you think of me, Mr. Haig?"

"I think that you are a brave girl," he said heartily—"and good as you are brave," he added with sincerity. "From what I have heard about you I have learned to respect you more and more."

"I am very grateful to you," she murmured with emotion. "It has been harder to bear than any one seems to think."

"No one, you see, knows anything for certain," Haig said kindly. "Your actions have been so shrouded in mystery."

"Oh, I have been compelled to! The secrecy has been terrible; and I fear it will end by my getting a bad name and having to leave home for ever. But I must not waste time speaking about my own

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troubles. Will you—will you go to Mr. Asgar—at once, Mr. Haig?"

"Yes; I intended to go in any case. You mustn't agitate yourself. I will go to the tower and keep him company till the morning."

"This is the way," Bessie said.

XXVI

HAIG let her lead him along a path between dark mounds of shrubs.

"Have you returned to your mother, Miss Ticehurst?"

"No, Mr. Haig; not yet. I am staying with Mrs. Leyton, an old friend of my mother's, at Hope-in-the-Valley."

"That's a pretty name," Haig said.
"Where is it?"

"On the verge of the Forest. There are only three or four houses. It used to be in the Forest, Mrs. Leyton says, before the clearances. Mrs. Leyton has been to my mother to tell her where I am."

"Is Hope-in-the-Valley far from Drum?"
Haig asked.

"I have not heard how many miles it is. Four or five, I should think. It seemed to take me a long while to get here."

"You drove?"

"No, I walked. There was no one in whom I could confide; I have not told Mrs. Leyton everything; women are so ready to misunderstand each other—where a rich man is concerned. Then they say I am strange—that I do things no one else would dream of doing—and this makes me more silent than I care to be, and indeed almost deceitful to some. One feels so shut up in oneself when one is looked on as cunning and unreliable."

She coughed in her handkerchief.

"If Mrs. Leyton begins also to regard me with suspicion, I shall go back again to Imberminster. She does not know I am here to-night: I cannot help it!—there are times when one must act alone. I was in

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t torment because I could not get out of my mind what Mr. Asgar said he would do to himself! He came to our house—that night, and I went out to him. It did not seem so wrong then; now I know it was wrong, and I tremble at the thought of ever coming face to face with Luke again. And Mrs. Asgar must think me quite bad. But he was not himself, Mr. Haig, and when he came to the window, he looked so distressed, I went out to pacify him, not thinking he would behave so wildly. I went to Imberminster when I ran away from him before—if it was running away, because I am not really afraid of him—oh, no; I am rather afraid of myself. . . . Mr. Haig," said Bessie, bending her eyes upon the ground, "I hope I have not been saying more to you than I should."

"Not at all, Miss Ticehurst; not at all. I only wish I could offer you some practical

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advice. But so long as Asgar has this craze upon him I think you will do well to keep away."

"Yes; I think so too, Mr. Haig. And I am so thankful you have listened to me. One finds it so difficult to go on suffering in secret."

"I thoroughly sympathise with you," Haig said. "But you mustn't get discouraged; it will all come right by-and-by. And then Asgar will be horribly ashamed of himself. We must try to persuade him to go abroad for a time."

"Yes," Bessie said, and the next instant added, "I am not blaming Mr. Asgar. No, no! I would not like you to suppose he has done anything dishonourable, Mr. Haig. I shall never forgive myself for the way I behaved when he spoke to me at the Brotherhood meeting. All this grief and distress has arisen from that. I should

have remembered who he was, and gone away at once."

"You've not been to blame in the least," Haig replied. "The position was an extremely difficult one, and I am convinced that you have all along behaved like a true little woman."

They came to a gate, and Haig entered the deer park. Bessie remained on the garden side of the gate.

"Will you hasten to the tower, Mr. Haig? And please do not say you have seen me. He *must* learn to forget me I can never forget him—but that is nothing—of course—oh, I should not have begun to speak to you," she cried; "I have said far too much!"

He gave her his hand.

"You won't mind my holding your hand a moment? I want to say two things to you. The one is, that your confidence will

ever be sacred to me. The other—that I shall regard it as an honour to place myself at your service at any time. I will add another thing, Miss Ticehurst—if you won't be offended—to-night I have acquired a higher reverence for womanhood."

She was too unaffected to pretend to misunderstand him: involuntarily, in an access of gratitude, she placed her other hand on his; and then she drew back gently into the deeper shade.

"Are you going on to your mother's?" Haig asked.

"No; I shall walk back to Hope-in-the Valley. Mrs. Leyton may not have missed me, and I have the key and can get in quietly."

"But you can't go all that distance alone at night!"

"Oh yes; I must. I shall not be

[REDACTED]

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frightened; one feels quite safe sometimes doing what they call strange things."

She was smiling tearfully.

"I don't want to be sent home—yet—by Mrs. Leyton! I will wait here till I see you go into the tower."

Haig left her there, and went up to the Deaf Tower.

XXVII

He was surprised to find the door open. But he did not immediately go in, concluding that Asgar was not there.

The elation of spirit which he had felt in Bessie's presence was already fading. No clear course of action was mapped out in his mind: he experienced again that miserable sense of bewildered helplessness —of his hands being tied—which beguiled him into an unreasoning fierceness of feeling and a weak lamentation of his not being a man of resource.

Haig swept his eyes across the hill-slope to the wood. Asgar was nowhere visible. He ventured a little way into the tower.

It was in darkness. Haig's knee touched

a chair, and putting his hand upon it he found a candlestick, which doubtless had been left there by Asgar.

He overturned a chair, but did not stop to pick it up : was minded rather to give it another kick. He groped his way to the couch by the south window and sank on it. Almost unconsciously he lurched into a corner and crossed his legs with the abrupt violence of ill-humour.

Petulance did not find tempting grazing ground in Haig's nature. But he was angry at last ; thoroughly out of sorts with Asgar and himself—with everybody and everything.

But this mood was not enduring ; his anger fell presently. The note of impending calamity was again in the air, and on Haig's heart. He shrank farther back upon the couch, moved by an ungovernable impulse to conceal himself.

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The horrible idea possessed him that he was keeping a tryst with Death.

No footfall was heard, without or within : Asgar's entrance was an effect in shadow, a description of nothingness. He was at the door—and not at the door—in the twinkling of an eye. It was like the passing of a soul : the silent quivering of the eternal mysteries : the miraculous fusion of the corporeal and the incorporeal, the visible and the invisible made one.

A sinister cold breath touched Haig : he could not yet realise his friend's presence in the tower.

Asgar nevertheless was there.

He shut and locked the door.

Then he struck a match ; and Haig saw him bending over the candle, lighting it.

He bore now the similitude of immense, unnatural size ; yet his face looked smaller and more spiritual in its absorbed intensity

of expression. It was unspeakably pathetic too; the eyes were as the eyes of one stricken blind, or under the influence of narcotics.

Asgar took the candlestick from the chair and went to the inner door. There he stopped, and his shoulder leaned heavily upon the door-post. The rusty hinges creaked; but other sound there was none.

Absolute stillness and silence continued for some moments. Asgar's reclining posture seemed to say: "I am tired out—utterly broken and weary of all this."

The amazement upon Haig was because of the sickliness of soul in so fine a frame. A certain awfulness was in the man's very composure. It was incredible, inhuman, in one in the heyday of manhood!

Asgar set his foot on the stair. Then he paused again, and turning on a sudden, walked across the room and stood before

the picture of the Perfect Woman over the chimneypiece.

He held up to it the light. His attitude expressed an essential reverence, a despairing farewell. His lips moved : Haig recalled the saying written on the picture : "When night has once passed into the human soul it never leaves it, though the stars may rise."

Could it be true after all? Haig asked himself ; watching meanwhile Asgar's every gesture. And—If it be true, then we must go on protesting to the end that it isn't!

Haig had a sharp revulsion of feeling ; he could have jumped up, torn the picture from the wall, and set his heel upon it.

But he did not rise till Asgar began to ascend the stair. He was at the foot of it in time to catch sight of a fading glimmer on the wall. He went up with exceeding caution.

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There was no handrail ; but Haig, having been on the stair before, knew something of its peculiarities. His heart was making a great uproar, and his mouth and throat were parched.

A lancet window and a gleam of moonlight brought Bessie before his mind's-eye. Was she there still—at the gate—or had she gone back to Hope-in-the-Valley ?

Soon he had Asgar in sight, and abbreviated his pace, to let him go on. He was holding the candle so high that Haig could see the flame over his head. He stooped like an old man ; there was a story of feebleness at his knees. His left arm hung by his side ; the hand seemed whiter and smaller than usual.

Asgar stopped at length before a closed door. Here, facing the oak panels, he stood up straight to his full stature, his head assuming an heroic pose.



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And Haig thought : "What a revolting mockery, that a man should dream of killing himself who could face death with that proud look!"

Every pulse of Haig's being cried out against this enormity, this crowning sacrilege against nature. Nor (God willing) should it come to pass this night at least.

As Asgar disappeared he pushed the door behind him. It did not shut ; Haig hastened up and pushed it half-way open. He listened : heard muffled footsteps (the room apparently was carpeted) ; heard a chair or other piece of furniture being moved.

After that, dead silence.

Haig crept into the room. It was sparingly furnished ; some dusty violet drapings were on the walls ; Haig saw nothing of a window. Asgar was seated in a chair, his back to the door.

He had put the candle on a small table



[REDACTED]

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before him, where there were writing things and two or three books. He leaned forward and took up a pen; held it a moment as though about to write, then threw it down again.

Haig went into the room, forcing a laugh and calling out gaily—

“Now I know what your hiding-hole is like! I vowed to myself I should. Lord! what a queer old place!”

And Haig stayed with Asgar throughout the night in the Deaf Tower.

XXVIII

FATHER STRAUSS's second visit to Drum was not more successful than his first had been.

He avoided Haig and Mr. Tarpath, and strolling about the gardens alone, ate a great deal of fruit. A gardener, of gayer wit than Luke, said, "That sky-pilot is dead nuts on peaches." On bidding Mrs. Asgar good-bye, Father Strauss gave her to understand that it would not be worth while for him to come again. He commended Edward Asgar to God, to his own conscience, and to the guidance of the voice of the Church in his soul—a voice which could never be silenced.

"The Church claims him," he said impressively. "He is her son, and she never

[REDACTED]

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gives her children up. He will return, and his surrender will be final."

He muttered a Latin phrase, which Mrs. Asgar did not understand.

Haig accompanied him to the station. Both walked fast ; otherwise it was not an animated journey. Haig was a little shy of this self-centred priest, and Father Strauss was a little supercilious of his companion. Haig did not know a chasuble from a cope, High Mass from Low Mass ; and the vicar of the Church of the Annunciation had small patience with this sort of ignorance. Asgar was only once mentioned during the walk to the station.

"With all his disobedience," said Father Strauss, "he cannot escape from the paramount importance of saving his own soul."

"It is important, of course," said Haig ; "only, I wish that some of the people who get into such a wax about their souls would

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find time to show a little more consideration for others."

"There is always selfishness in rebellion against Divine authority," said Father Strauss. "Mr. Asgar has been tempted from the placidity of the land of promise into the burning turmoil of the desert."

"I should like to upset his apple-cart," said Haig, "and bring him home with a cracked pate." To this piece of flippancy no reply was given, and Haig added, "Was there any real harm in that Brotherhood? It appeared to be an outlet for his super-abundant energy."

"In itself it may not have been harmful. But certain legitimate things are inexpedient and sinful when they do not receive the sanction of the Church. That was Mr. Asgar's primary mistake, and it has led him to deeper sorrow."

Two days later Father Gurney and Jack

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Beilby came to Drum. Gurney looked careworn and haunted, as if he had all Asgar's sins on his conscience. But Beilby was in the self-satisfied temper of one who meant to enjoy himself.

Mrs. Asgar was especially kind to Gurney, having known and loved the young priest's parents; but her demeanour toward Beilby was not more than polite.

Gurney, from a natural modesty, did not speak to Mrs. Asgar of the true object of his visit; though of course she guessed it. When she had retired after luncheon he asked Haig to take him to the Deaf Tower.

"He is not there," Haig assured him. "But it's a charming stroll through the park."

"I hope Beilby will not go with us," Gurney whispered.

But just as they had got into the park, Mr. Tarpath and Beilby, leaving the garden

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by another gate, joined them, and Gurney said to Haig, with a pathetic smile, "It doesn't matter. Let him come."

Beilby observed that the tower reminded him of Arundel park.

"There ought to be a lake, water-lilies, and swans," he said.

Mr. Tarpath (who had lunched at Drum) was also in a pleasant mood : the excitement from which Gurney suffered was scarcely suspected by the easy-going rector. Had he been able to realise it, he would have regarded it with the traditional contempt of the old beneficed clergy for enthusiasm. Neither Mr. Tarpath nor Jack Beilby was disposed to spoil his digestion and shorten his life through over-anxiety. The luncheon, moreover, had been first-rate ; and Jack was a judge of wine.

Haig knocked.

"He is not here," he said.

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But he knocked again.

"Sounds empty," said Beilby. "Why, Gurney, you're shivering!" he cried. "Is there a ghost, Haig?"

"Shut up, Jack."

"Let me give it a bang," said Beilby.

"No, no," said Gurney; "if he is there he may be angry."

But Beilby thumped at the door and shouted dramatically, "What ho! there, Asgar!"

Haig took the noisy fellow by the shoulders and pushed him away.

"Hush!" said Gurney.

They listened: Beilby broke the silence with a laugh.

"Upon my word," he said, "Asgar is a bit of a—"

"I have a sincere respect for Mr. Asgar," Mr. Tarpath said, "and a genuine veneration for his mother."



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"Oh, so we all have," said Beilby. "She's a delicious old lady. We needn't bother here. Let's go over there in the sun and have a stretch on the grass. Come on, Haig. Is there any game about the place? I haven't seen as much as a rabbit's tail."

As they stood before the door Father Gurney made the sign of the cross. Every one fell silent; Mr. Tarpath sighed and turned away his head. Then suddenly Father Gurney knelt on the grass, clasped his hands and bowed his head; his prayer was not audible. As he rose he lifted his hand toward the door and again made the sign of the cross.

Then Jack Beilby winked at Haig. Mr. Tarpath had meanwhile walked away.

"He will come back," Gurney said in a low tremulous voice; "he must return! The gate of the fold is still open, and the

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Shepherd is holding out His arms to welcome him!"

They wandered about the park for half-an-hour, and then sat on a bench under a tree.

"This seat ought to be groaning under such a burden," Haig said.

Beilby lighted his pipe, and asked if Mrs. Asgar objected to smoking indoors. No one answered him, and Jack unconcernedly added, "If Drum belonged to me, I should plant covers and have no end of game. What an amazing chap Asgar must be! There's everything here a man wants; and look at that solid old house. Yet he must go and play second fiddle to old Strauss, and sleep in a band-box of a room in that stuffy clergy-house!"

"Certainly," said Mr. Tarpath, "the proceeding to which you refer was extraordinary. I am constrained to state, as a

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minister of our National Protestant Church
as by law established——”

“Hold Gurney down,” Beilby cried in a
laugh to Haig, who was seated next to the
young priest.

“It appears,” continued Mr. Tarpath,
offended, “that one is nowadays in danger
of rebuke—ahem—by one’s juniors—in
alluding to the character of our national
religion.”

“Oh, Mr. Gurney won’t allow that the
Church of England is Protestant,” Beilby
said mischievously. “Nor will Asgar; I’ve
heard him say that if it were Protestant he
should have nothing to do with it.”

“Mr. Asgar is absent,” the rector of
Drum pointed out.

“The Annunciation people denounce the
Reformers as a gang of ruffians,” said
Beilby. “Asgar’s special abhorrence is
Henry VIII.; and Strauss has written a

tract showing 'em all up—the politest specimen of bad language I've ever read."

"But the Church of England *is* Protestant," Mr. Tarpath insisted with spirit. "She has discarded Papistical superstition, which is foreign to the genius of the English people. We cannot get away from that fact, however disagreeable it may be to certain law-breakers."

"Law-breakers!" said Gurney. "Who—may I ask, sir—are the law-breakers in the Church?"

"The other party," said Haig; "those who don't agree with you."

Gurney was about to speak; but Mr. Tarpath made a deprecating gesture.

"It surely," he said, "cannot honestly be contended that the services in the Church of the Annunciation in the town of Imberminster are in accordance with the law."

"If you mean the law of the State, the

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laws passed by an atheistical Parliament—they assuredly are not,” Gurney proudly and defiantly admitted. “We are prepared to obey the State in temporal things; in spiritual things we know not Cæsar!”

“But ours is a State Church,” Mr. Tarpath urged.

“The State,” said Gurney, “has grown up under the sheltering arms of the Church, and in its wicked arrogance of brute strength it has had the impertinence to interfere in the Divine ordinances of the Church; it has even audaciously presumed to dictate to the Church how much she shall retain of the deposit of Catholic truth and how much of that sacred inheritance she shall cast away! In times past faithless and lukewarm sons of the Church have submitted to this profane infamy. Apostates!” Father Gurney cried, his excitement increasing, his face flushed. “But the Church,

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even in her darkest hour, has always had a remnant of the faithful, thank God! And now that we are returning in our tens of thousands to the pure Catholic faith, all the forces of Cæsar are uniting against us. A new era of persecution is setting in. But we shall meet it calmly! We shall not flinch even should the Beast of Apocalypse come back in his horrible hate and the cry again be raised, 'The Christians to the lions!' "

"There's no fear of that, my dear fellow," Haig said; "amiable sceptics like Jack and me would prevent it."

Gurney touched his arm. "There were such in the Neronian age," he said; "but for all that the amphitheatre blazed with burning Christians and ran with Christian blood. And the Church," he went on in a louder voice, "is ready for another baptism of fire. And we should go to the lions, or

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give our poor bodies to be living flambeaux, without a murmur! The Church will not much longer compromise with a godless and luxurious civilisation ; she will stop and meet it face to face and denounce it ; and then the claws of the Beast will be seen!"

"Let's wait," said Beilby ; "it won't be in our time anyhow. And meanwhile this is not half a bad sort of world."

"Civilised society is bowing God out of His universe !" Gurney exclaimed. "The Church has been robbed of her authority, and there is no hope for the human race until she regains it. The Protestant says that man is the best judge of what is good for his soul ; the Catholic says that the Church is the only judge. That is the great and fundamental difference between Protestantism and Catholicism."

"You will pardon me," said Mr. Tarpath, "but I am obliged to remark that such a

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statement is a gross slander on our Protestant religion. History teaches us that Protestantism and virility of character go together. All Catholic nations have degenerated; all Protestant nations have gone on growing in strength and prosperity."

"Ah, the old story!" said Gurney. "'We are Protestant and prosperous: that is religion—that shows God is with us.' To my mind it proves just the reverse. 'My kingdom is not of this world.'"

"You're getting rather wild, Gurney," Haig put in. "I've known a lot of beautiful spirits who were Protestants. In the finest type of Protestant I find a mingled strength and tenderness that is not equalled—or I'll say, that's very attractive."

"Quite so," said Mr. Tarpath.

"Oh, that's true enough," said Beilby. "But Gurney and his party are mad on



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submission to authority. The Bible is plain enough."

"If we would read it," said Mr. Tarpath.

"Don't blush, Jack," said Haig. "For my part—you needn't listen to this mid-summer madness, Gurney—I regard Protestantism as the only form of religion possible to a self-respecting man. But I sniff good and bad in all the sects. I confess, indeed, to a sneaking admiration of the Salvation Army."

"Their methods are scarcely decorous," Mr. Tarpath thought. "But still more blameworthy, to my mind, is the conduct of the advanced men in our own Church. What possible excuse, for example, can there be for the lawless audacity—I might quote from the Articles an even stronger term—of the Reserved Sacrament, compulsory confession—"

"*Auricular* confession, Mr. Tarpath,"

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interposed Gurney (whose bitterness surprised Haig): "don't forget that precious morsel on Protestant lips!"

"—the lawless audacity," said the rector, "of images of the Virgin Mary and prayers to her, the singing of the Agnus Dei in Latin, and indeed the whole Romish Mass, with non-communicating attendance?"

"Without the Holy Sacrifice of the altar," said Gurney—"the sublimest act of Christian worship—the Church becomes little more than a human institution. There can be no priesthood without the Real Presence, and no laic cohesion."

As Mr. Tarpath was getting agitated: "Now," said Haig, "let a common heathen man speak. You good people complain of so much scepticism being about; and you're pretty hard on 'the world.' You've been spiritually doctoring it for nineteen centuries, with millions upon millions of money and



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all the arts and all the social influences at your command, and yet here is the poor old 'world' still wondering at some of you being such good Catholics, or such good Protestants, that you seem to forget to be Christians."

Mr. Tarpath would not condescend to notice this rank paganism. "The advanced men in the Church," he said, "cannot be described as honest. Their doctrine of expediency has become an instrument of perfected Jesuitry—of imminent danger to the State. They lose no opportunity of declaring their willingness to obey the bishops, but it is notorious that they habitually disregard episcopal admonitions. The bishops, I fear," added Mr. Tarpath, "are not guiltless of—let me say timidity—in dealing with this daring conspiracy to overthrow the Protestantism of the Church of England."

Haig, to keep Gurney quiet, talked.

[REDACTED]

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“The bishops, as I make out their position, are in such a fix just now that it is scarcely possible for them to avoid the appearance of trimming. My experience of Ritualism in large towns is that in Church life it holds the field. There can be no doubt about the restoration of the Mass ; I have seen a congregation of some two thousand people so prostrate themselves at the ringing of the sanctus bell, that they seemed to be touching the floor with their foreheads. What, in these circumstances, can the poor bishops do ? ”

“The evil began,” said Mr. Tarpath, “with the appointment of prelates in sympathy with Tractarianism.”

“It takes all sorts to make up that queer mixture called humanity,” Beilby said.

“Well, as I spoke about the Salvation Army,” said Haig, “I’ll give you my experience of them — or at least of one of



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them. This was a woman, and it happened when I was staying in the Midlands. I was out for a walk, and came upon a little building in which evidently a fine uproar was going on. So I went in to see what the fun was, and found a Salvation Army service in progress. To be right, the service didn't come off; a mob of young rustics—full-blooded rascals after Beilby's physical style—wouldn't have it. Clearly they had stormed the place to kick up a rumpus, and they were making the most hideous uproar—their language would have horrified even you, Jack. The woman—she was the only woman there—was standing at the farther end with a book in her hand. I felt sorry for her; she was a plucky little woman, but she couldn't make her voice heard at all in that bear-garden. At last she came calmly down into the very midst of them, and went on her knees and

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started to pray. Jack Beilby, if you were to squeeze up all *your* inspired moments into a single prayer it wouldn't produce an effect like that."

"They knelt with her?" Gurney said eagerly.

"No; they didn't do that. She didn't pitch into the scamps, you know. She prayed for them—"

"Yes; she would do that," Gurney murmured.

"I can't tell you how she managed it," continued Haig; "this is not in my line, you know. But she gave them a scare, and they slouched out with their tails between their legs, until only a congregation of one was left."

"The congregation's name being Arthur Haig," Beilby suggested.

"That is so."

"Then the congregation was pleased to

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conduct the reverend lady home," was Beilby's farther suggestion.

"That's not an accusation I should like to deny," said Haig.

"And she tried to convert you!"

"There wouldn't be any use your trying to do that, Jack."

"So she did ask you if you were saved! What did you say, Arthur?"

"I ought to have sent her to you, Reverend John. If that woman had tackled you before your ordination I don't think you'd have been quite the colossal clerical fraud you are now."

"This conversation," said Mr. Tarpath rising, "has drifted into a channel which is scarcely improving."

* * * * *

Mrs. Asgar, the next day, heard that her son was at Glyndcombe, a village about two miles and a half from Drum: he

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had been seen there in Mr. Renvil's garden.

"Who is Mr. Renvil?" Haig asked.

"He is the Nonconformist minister at Glyndcombe, and a valued old friend of mine."

"Then he will be in safe keeping," said Haig. "But this is enough to make poor Gurney roll in dust and ashes."

"Edward may not be with Mr. Renvil, after all," said Mrs. Asgar. "He may have called, but he would scarcely stay. The cottage is very small; there is not a spare bedroom."

"Let us give Rosa an airing," said Haig, "and make sure."

So it was decided.

"But we must keep our visit a secret from Mr. Tarpath."

"And Father Strauss," said Haig.

"Oh, I should not be so concerned were

Father Strauss to know. Mr. Tarpath seems to have a prejudice against Nonconformists, and one does not like to offend one's own rector. Besides, I have been very double-dealing — toward Mr. Tarpath — in my friendship with Mr. Renvil; and having gone so far, it will be better to continue in the same way. Perhaps," said Mrs. Asgar, lowering her eyeglasses and raising her eyebrows humorously, "I am fond of this mysterious friendship. It began many years ago, and I—I have *twice* been to Glyndcombe to hear Mr. Renvil preach."

Haig opened his eyes in terrific amazement.

"Mrs. Asgar!"

"Yes, I have. And Edward knew; I told him. Ah," she said, "if only I could believe that it was the remembrance of my having told him. . . . But I suppose he would be passing the cottage, and Mr. Renvil may have called him into the garden."

XXIX

So on an afternoon of gentle sun and breeze they set out for Glyndcombe : Mrs. Asgar in her pony-carriage, Haig on foot. Rosa was abnormally lazy, but this did not in the least irritate Haig ; for it was good to be under the sky on so sweet a day, and Rosa ambled in lovely places. They would probably, Haig reflected, get to Glyndcombe by sunset, but as he did not believe for a moment that Asgar was there, Rosa's dalliance in the sun was of no consequence.

Nor was Mrs. Asgar at all in a hurry : again and again she encouraged Rosa to stop ; and her innocent enjoyment of natural sights and sounds was an added pleasure to Haig

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She saw nature with the eyes of a child, and therefore had very little to say ; one does not begin to analyse beauty till one's heart grows old. Mrs. Asgar would sit silent, looking, smiling, listening, the reins slackening in her hands ; and sometimes she would make a brief comment, such as "How beautiful the sunlight is among beech-trees," or "Look at those wild-flowers, Arthur, growing on that old wall," or "Oh, those red poppies in the corn," or "Don't hit that decayed branch with your stick, Arthur ; there is a moth upon it." He would look, but see nothing, and she would show him (leaning out of the pony-carriage) how the brown moth was clinging to the twig, and then they would enter upon an amiably unscientific discussion as to whether the moth behaved thus instinctively or with intelligence. Mrs. Asgar would take one side, and Haig the other, and all the while



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they would be in entire agreement. And once Rosa, thinking no doubt that she was doing the best for herself, got into a narrow lane between a bank of wild-flowers and a cornfield, and when the way became rough, Rosa of course came to a standstill, and Mrs. Asgar had to get out and walk. Even then Rosa declined to budge.

"Let us go on and she will follow," said Mrs. Asgar; "she is always so afraid of being left alone."

So Mrs. Asgar and Haig made their way along the lane in a shower of golden butterflies, and when they were out of it they sat on the bank and waited till Rosa was pleased to come.

"My dear girl," said Haig, addressing the pony, "the London 'bus horses are dreaming of you, and they call it the beatific vision."

On going down a hilly road Mrs. Asgar



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got out again, Haig protesting in vain. A woman of the working class passed, and Mrs. Asgar told Haig a story about her.

"I am afraid she does not like me now. You know, I had been several times to her cottage, and gave her help; but I heard certain things about her and her husband, so I called on her once, resolved not to give her anything. I must tell you how cunning I was about it. I took the rosiest view of everything. 'You have nice drawing-room chairs,' I said, and she said they were not hers, and I could not ask questions, of course. 'And you have a nice new carpet,' I said, and she answered it had been rolled up. Then there were two stuffed gulls, standing up facing each other, horrible looking monsters—though it is rude of me to say so—and I said, 'Nice stuffed birds, too, and just then the man called to collect the rent, and the woman sent out her little girl

with eight shillings for him. ‘I am glad to see you are getting on so well, paying your way,’ I said, and took my leave. She and her husband drink, and I am going to see her again, because it is not right to leave such people alone, even if they do impose on one. When her husband goes home tipsy, and finds his wife tipsy, he always beats her.”

“Genuine British husband!” said Haig.

They at last drew near to Glyndcombe; and Mrs. Asgar pointed out the vicarage.

“We will pass it on our return; let us go this way now.—Oh, Rosa, please make haste.”

“Shall I give her a taste of the stick?” said Haig.

“No, no; she would never forgive me. See, she is going faster now.”

“Is the Church Christian jealous of the Chapel Christian?” Haig asked bluntly.

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"One must not speak of jealousy in regard to ministers of religion, Arthur. They are gentlemen, whatever their faults may be. I have not known a clergyman who was not a gentleman."

"I have known a few," said Haig, "who were insufferable snobs. But my experience of them must have been unfortunate. Let me say, then, that Mr. Leon does not sympathise with Nonconformists. Does the heretic visit at the vicarage?"

"Oh—oh—no; the vicar and Mr. Renvil do not speak to one another."

"Do they speak *at* one another from their pulpits?"

"Mr. Renvil would not; and no one would expect Mr. Leon to stoop to personalities. They have lived in the same village for many years, and yet they are as strangers to each other. I think that is so painful."

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"Satanic, rather," Haig remarked. ("Old Harry must enjoy a skip across Glyndcombe," he said to himself). "Is it a 'fat' living?"

"Fairly so; and Mr. Leon is understood to be a rich man. He had a distinguished University career, and now he lives a very retired life. They are both widowers, and when Mr. Leon's only child, a beautiful girl, died a few years ago, Mr. Renvil met him on the high-road a day or two after the funeral, and could not pass him without stopping to offer his sympathy. Mr. Leon listened, said 'Thank you,' bowed, and passed on; and afterwards they were just as complete strangers as before. Mr. Renvil was sorrowful in telling me. One must," Mrs. Asgar added, "give Mr. Leon credit for loyalty to the Church, and his life is beyond reproach."

"That sort of man," said Haig, "would

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be equally sincere as a priest of Baal—only he would leave other people to do the gashing with knives."

Mrs. Asgar said he must not be uncharitable.

"And now I will tell you a great secret, which you must not divulge to any one—especially not to Mr. Tarpath, who would be shocked, I fear, were he to learn what has been going on behind his back." She was silent awhile. "Is any one coming?"

Haig wheeled round.

"A flock of crows. They must be watching for Rosa to perish in the dust."

"Arthur! Well, some years ago—this was when Edward was at Winchester—I discovered that Mr. Renvil's income was only £75 a year, and that, owing to his congregation being so small and poor, he could not hope for more. His dear wife was then alive, and I loved her, as I love him.

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Arthur, you must not tell; even Edward does not know."

"Well, I do," said Haig.

"Oh, who can have told you?"

"I guess what is coming. You increased the Nonconformist minister's stipend."

"*Yes.*"

Haig's laugh frightened a bird from the hedge.

"I promise not to betray your confidence, Mrs. Asgar. But you shouldn't speak about Mr. Renvil's stipend to any one who knows you; for they would soon guess the rest."

"I bought the cottage in which he lives and let him have it rent free. But the rental was only five shillings a week; so that was not enough, and I added £25 to his income."

All this Mrs. Asgar whispered; and Haig laughed again.

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"So for years you have been weighed down by this awful secret!"

"I must confess," she said with smiling eyes, "it has not been such a heavy burden on my conscience. His sister keeps house for him, and it is not easy for them to make both ends meet, as Miss Renvil suffers much from ill-health. If she is at home she is sure to say that I may never see her alive again. She always says that. But there is Mr. Leon; I hope he won't come this way."

"He carries misery on those shoulders," said Haig. "He didn't see us."

"He lives quite alone in the vicarage now. He has aged very much since the death of his wife and daughter. He occasionally takes the Wednesday evening service at Drum, when Mr. Tarpath is away or ill, and it makes one melancholy to hear him read the prayers.—No, no; this way, Rosa, please!"

XXX

Rosa having been put up at the village tavern, Mrs. Asgar and Haig walked on to Mr. Renvil's cottage.

"Is it not pretty?" she said.

"There seems to be too much garden," Haig replied.

"You must not offend him by saying so. Perhaps it is a little crowded," Mrs. Asgar said. "Luke comes over every spring to help him in the heavy work."

The cottage had a smothered appearance : one gable was a mass of ivy, with an immense dangling top-knot ; over the other a vine ran to leaves voluptuously ; the tiled roof was garnished with silver and orange stonecrop ; roses covered the walls and

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dwarfed the windows ; the visitors had to go warily through a sprawling heap of passion-flower, called a portico, to get to the door.

"It is pretty—isn't it?" said Mrs. Asgar.

"Also spidery," said Haig, dodging the tendrils.

Mrs. Asgar tapped twice at the open door ; and as no one came, Haig said—

"Shall I give it a touch ?"

"No ; I will go in."

She looked back from the passage.

"He is asleep."

"Edward ?"

"Mr. Renvil. It would be a pity to wake him ; I have an impression that Edward is not here. Let us go round the house and see if Miss Renvil is in the garden."

But already the pastor was awake and at the door : a meek little old man, with white hair and clear blue eyes.

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"Mrs. Asgar! Come in; come in, dear friend," he said in murmurous dove-like tones.

("He looks," thought Haig, "like the Nunc Dimittis.")

"Catherine has gone to the town on a shopping expedition," Mr. Renvil explained, when they were seated. "But I will make you a cup of tea, Mrs. Asgar—and you, sir—" He stirred the fire and put on the kettle. "It will soon boil; you must be fatigued."

"Oh no; Rosa brought us," said Mrs. Asgar. "I am sorry your sister is absent. Is my son still—still here, Mr. Renvil?"

"No; but we expect him again; he was good enough to promise us a second visit."

"I have not seen him for a day or two," Mrs. Asgar observed, letting her eyelids gently fall. "He came to you last week, I understand."



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"Yes, on Monday; and he remained till the Tuesday evening."

"He slept here, then?"

"On Monday night—yes; and we had most interesting and instructive conversations." Mr. Renvil indicated a large sofa against the wall. "Mr. Asgar slept there; and he assured us the next morning that he had been quite comfortable. I wished him to have my bed, but he would not consent to that; so we put some chairs before the sofa to keep him from falling off. He ate so heartily of Catherine's salad for supper, she was afraid he would have a nightmare, and so she made him put on one of my nightcaps to prevent it."

("I should like to have seen him in that nightcap," Haig said to himself.)

"Did he wear it, Mr. Renvil?" Mrs. Asgar asked.



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"Oh yes; he was most obliging and kind."

"And cheerful?" said his mother timidly.

"Well, not so cheerful as we could have desired. I perceived he was in some uneasiness respecting religious matters, and I proceeded at once to give him such encouragement as I might."

"I hope you were firm with him."

"Indeed I was; Catherine says *too* firm. She has been declaring ever since that I drove him from the house! She says I was always preaching at him; but as I tell her, he induced me to preach at him when he came—it seemed to me, if I may presume to say so, that he came for that express purpose—and once I had commenced I found it undesirable to leave off. So you will understand how firm I was!"

"You are hopeful of him, then?"

"Yes. Oh, yes—full of hope. Having



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gathered how it was with him, that he is passing through the crisis of—I may say—*partial* doubt, so common to intellectual young men, I resolved to have nothing whatever to do with dialectics. Accordingly, when he spoke of the Real Presence, I quoted the words in the Lord's Prayer, 'Thy Kingdom come; Thy will be done,' and told him how to me that was the Real Presence. . . . He gave me to understand," said Mr. Renvil, "that he has broken with his friends at Imberminster."

"Yes. Would you say he is likely to go back to them?"

"He may: I have been thinking it is probable."

"But in his opinions he is now very far from them."

"Too far, Mrs. Asgar, to remain where he is. Your dear son, it seems to me, is one of those to whose peculiar temperament

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forms and ceremonies are essential. I noticed that in the house he bowed, and in the garden he raised his hat, whenever the name of Jesus was spoken. He appeared to do it instinctively, as though he could not help doing it; and so I refrained from all discussion of these things with him. As I say, I am full of hope concerning your son, Mrs. Asgar. It is impossible to despair of one who bows at the name of Jesus."

"I am glad I came to see you, Mr. Renvil. I remember when Edward was a boy finding him standing before a picture of the Virgin and Child; he had dressed himself in white, and his hands were raised above his head. I asked him what he was doing, and he became confused and would not tell me. I coaxed him, and he said he had been 'saying Holy Communion.'" Mrs. Asgar sighed. "I have often thought of this; and I fear in not

[REDACTED]

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becoming a clergyman he may have missed his vocation."

"I have seen him," said Haig, "make the sign of the cross at his own thoughts."

"He informed me," said Mr. Renvil, "that at one period it had been his intention to become a priest."

"It is too late now," Mrs. Asgar murmured. "You urged him to patience and self-possession?"

"Again and again! Catherine says my treatment of him was unbecoming—as if he were a child. But I would not meet him even half way in controversy, and when he talked theologically I answered him with the plain truth of the Scriptures. We may, I warned him (he did not mind what I said), spoil the simplicity of the Christian life by excess of learning. It is strange and sad to consider how many people are versed in books *about* the Bible and yet remain igno-

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rant of the Bible itself. I have known clever men who have been severe and scornful critics of the Bible but failed to give from memory a plain account of the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount. They could not even repeat the Beatitudes accurately."

Mrs. Asgar's head was making a singularly touching automatic motion.

"I am grateful to you, Mr. Renvil, for your kindness to my son. Did he go to your chapel?"

"No ; there was no service, and I should not have expected him to go had there been ; I should have committed him to my sister's care, and not told him where I was going. He asked me about my sermons, but I had none to show him, as I do not write them ; and then he was eager to learn my method of preparation ; and thus agreeably the two days of his visit passed."

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The pastor, standing on the hearth, moved up and down on the tips of his toes ; his was the atmosphere of the pure in heart.

"Catherine and I sang in the evening, 'Nothing in my hand I bring ; Simply to Thy cross I cling ;' and Catherine says—I hope I may tell you this—she saw tears in your dear son's eyes."

"Thank God !" said Mrs. Asgar.

"Thank — thank God," said the old minister. His hands slowly rose and fell : all his being became as it were the singing of the song of love—the song which to him was ever new. "It was when we were alone, seated here, that he said to me, 'My life has been a failure.' I endeavoured to persuade him otherwise, and as he persisted in it, then I asked him, 'Do you mean a failure before God, or before your fellows ?' and when he fell, as I made out from his silence, on a deep consideration of this, I

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went on to show him how that failure in the world's esteem may be a very different thing in the eyes of our Father in heaven. Indeed, I held to it that the nearer a man is to Christ the more hopeless are his chances of success in the world; when he stands at the foot of the Cross the praise or the blame of men have no meaning for him. He thinks not of himself: he is lost in adoration and love; and there he understands something of that wonderful, wonderful saying, 'He saved others; Himself He cannot save'"

The twilight was beginning to tinge the little room. Mrs. Asgar rose to go. Haig went to bring Rosa on to the cottage.

"If my son should come again, you will keep him as long as you can? I feel it is good for him to be here."

"You must not, dear friend," Mr. Renvil said, as they stood waiting at the gate, "be

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too disappointed if eventually he should re-join his friends in Imberminster."

"Anything," said Mrs. Asgar, "would be better than this storm of doubt in which he is being tossed to and fro."

Haig came with Rosa. "You'll have to hurry up, sleek-sides," he said, "or the highwaymen will be upon us!"

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[REDACTED]

XXXI

"Has either of you gentlemen," said Mrs. Asgar to the rector and Haig, "heard anything farther about that poor old woman in the Forest?"

"The witch?" said Mr. Tarpath. "Yes; I am told she is entirely forsaken now."

"But she has a daughter, has she not?" said Mrs. Asgar.

"So I heard," Haig replied. "Some one was telling me. A singular case, if the stories be true."

"Even the daughter has left her," said Mr. Tarpath. "She is absolutely alone. None of the foresters will go near her; she is bedridden and helpless. It seems they believe that she is possessed of an evil spirit, and that

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that she did not
like her son's wife
and that it was
not good for him
to have such a wife
and about any
old cow house
the daughter, who
mother's appearance

"Most unnatural."

"As for the

rector, swing
take account
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his eye—this one——"

"Squint?" said Haig.

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XXXII

MRS. ASGAR, on a silver and blue morning, came into the hall from the garden with the letter-bag. Haig was there, and she asked him to open the bag and see if there was news from Edward.

He emptied out the letters on a table, at which Mrs. Asgar seated herself resignedly.

"The boy was playing mohawks with other boys," she said smiling, "and we had quite a search for the bag. The careless child could not remember where he had laid it, and we found it at last in a bed of nettles."

"The same brilliant youth, I suppose," said Haig, "who wanted to buy you in a

chemist's shop. You should have boxed his ears."

"But that would have made him dislike me; and when you grow as old as I am, Arthur, you will understand how good it is, how cheering, to be thought well of by one's friends."

"I shall never be as young as you are—to begin with," Haig said. "And see here: letters with kisses outside the envelopes—just think of flinging kisses among nettles!"

"Let me look," said Mrs. Asgar.

She adjusted her eye-glasses: her face had the animation of beautiful thoughts.

"One for Agnes—he is a carpenter at Imberminster: a most excellent young man, though you would not think so from his appearance. He has such a terrible frown, and his eye—this one——"

"Squint?" said Haig.

[REDACTED]

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"Oh, but you must not say it in that rude way ; it is very unfeeling, and Agnes would never have forgiven you had she heard. She often speaks to me about it, and I have told her not to take it so much to heart. Some one sent her a cutting from one of those spiteful newspapers, in which it was said that an eye of that sort meant derangement of mind, and the poor girl wept terribly over the insulting remark."

Mrs. Asgar leaned forward and looked past Haig down the hall.

"I will tell you something else about Agnes, to show you how devoted she is to him. His fellow-workmen, it seems, call him 'cock-eyed Bill'—a most heartless thing to do—and Agnes told me she had written advising him to change his name and say it was William."

Mrs. Asgar spread her hands on her lap and laughed softly.

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"And did he do it?"

"I don't know for certain—how unkind it is for me to laugh so. But I think he must have taken her advice, because she proudly showed me a letter in which he said he had knocked a man into a cellar. It was signed 'your ever true and loving William,' and she always speaks of him as William now, and sulks for days when any of the other servants call him Bill. I really ought not to be so frivolous over his misfortune. But I shall make it up to Agnes when they are married."

Haig had separated the letters for Mrs. Asgar and the servants. There was one for himself: he held it so that Mrs. Asgar might not see the superscription.

"And this one is for Mary, from Robert Lennard; I don't wonder that he should put these crosses on the outside, for she always sends his letters back unopened—

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I would be very displeased with her if she did not—and so this is the only way he has of declaring his affection."

"A wild fellow?"

"Oh, he drinks so. And what is worse, he is a humorous drunkard; he appears to regard a state of dreadful intoxication as 'great fun,' as the children say. I have preached to him such long sermons; but it is impossible to get him to realise the seriousness of it. Mr. Tarpath has done his best too, and on one occasion addressed him as plainly as good manners would allow from the pulpit."

Mrs. Asgar raised her arm very solemnly.

"I think it might make him feel ashamed of himself if the rector were to point to him directly from the pulpit, and quote what the Scriptures say about drunkards. And I am told—though I hardly like to believe that this can be true—that he is

an admirable workman when in drink, and scarcely any use at all when sober."

"He must be like those insects we read of," said Haig; "when they are dry they are in a state of suspended animation, and you have only to wet them and they become alive again."

"Ah! we must not talk lightly of it," said Mrs. Asgar. "Are these my letters? Thank you; I will go in and read them."

She looked them over.

"No news from Edward yet. But I must be patient; he has often remained silent longer than this. And here is a letter from your dear sister. Oh, Arthur," as they were going along the hall, "you remember what I was telling you about Bessie?—the rumour that she had been seen at Hope-in-the-Valley. I mentioned the matter to Mr. Tarpath, and he has promised to send to see if there is any



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truth in the rumour. Have you been making inquiries?"

"I've not been there yet," Haig said. "But I questioned two or three people in a roundabout way. Apparently they had heard nothing. Where is Hope-in-the-Valley?" he asked, avoiding her eyes.

"On the Forest, some five miles from Drum. It is a pretty little place; I know it well. If Rosa is in better spirits to-morrow, we must drive over and try to find out whether Bessie has really been seen there. Perhaps you might ride the Flying Dutchman."

"Oh yes," said Haig, "I could tackle the Flying Dutchman. His flying days are nearly over. But he might be able to keep up with Rosa—if I coaxed him a bit."

Mrs. Asgar tapped his arm. "You have just your sweet mother's saucy ways. But



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I assure you he was exceedingly swift once, and would leap a hedge when Edward's father called to him from another field."

"Sugar?" said Haig.

"Yes; he is fond of sugar. And when we go to the Forest we may learn something about the poor old forsaken woman they call a witch."



XXXIII

HAIG went to his room to read his letter. It was from Asgar, dated two days before, from a London hotel. The writing was so bad Haig could not make out several parts of it; but he gathered enough of the meaning to make him decide to go to London at once.

He felt completely upset. Mrs. Asgar must at all hazards be kept in ignorance of the dire significance of the letter. Haig put it in his pocket, and the moment after, pulled it out, to make sure it was there.

He looked at his watch. There was plenty of time to catch the first train to London. He wondered what he should say to Mrs. Asgar.

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A sharp walk over the hills would rid him
of this mental fog, thank goodness!

He went to the glass, brushed his hair,
and put on a less florid necktie. Having
taken some trifles from his portmanteau,
he went down to the hall.

It was deserted. Haig got his overcoat,
hat, and walking-stick. He stood awhile
in the hall looking out through the great
wide-open doors.

A throstle was singing on a tree that
seemed to smile serenely on the wearisome
little generations of men : the coming
and going, the fears of that which is high
and that which shall be in the way, the
clamorous saving and losing of souls.

Haig's mind grew calmer. The common
flowers that embroidered the lawn seemed
to say to him : "Stay—you can do nothing."
The stillness of the beautiful old house took
hold upon him ; it had a friendliness, a

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sympathy almost human. He had often felt this, but never so keenly as now.

He threw his things on a chair, and entered the drawing-room, where Mrs. Asgar was reading her letters.

"I am sorry to interrupt you, Mrs. Asgar."

She regarded him inquiringly.

"Oh no."

"I shall be obliged to go to London."

"This morning?"

"Yes; now. I must try to catch the next train. There is time enough; I shall enjoy the walk."

Her face was habitually so pale that Haig had learned to watch her eyes for indications of feeling.

"I hope nothing serious calls you away so suddenly?"

"No, no, Mrs. Asgar. Nothing serious at all."

She gathered up the letters from her lap,

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laid them on the sofa, and rising in her slow dignified fashion, moved close to him.

"I shall miss you very much. I will not say you have been a second son to me; no one can ever be that, quite. But you have become to me a very dear companion and friend. When you came I was glad to see you for your mother's sake, and I have learned to love you for your own sake. You have been so patient with me, Arthur, when often, I fear, I must have been a sore trial to you."

At this Haig could not hold up his head like a man.

"Mrs. Asgar, I had thought that the gratitude must be all on my side. My stay at Drum has been . . . you have made a light shine within me which I do not think anything can ever put out. Ah, you don't know what you have done for me, and I can't tell you."

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"I am so happy to hear you say that. I do not take it to myself, of course. We are so quiet here, and you have taught yourself the value of being quiet; and no praise is due to me for that. But I must not be selfish, and keep you all to myself, when your friends must be anxious to see you again; and I am sure they will say you are looking well. Your dear sister sends affectionate messages to you. And some day you may wish to come again to see that tiresome old woman at Drum—perhaps in the spring, when the birds are nesting, and then I will show you many wonderful things. Yes, and we shall always—at *any* time—have a room to spare for you and make you welcome in our old-fashioned homely way. When may we expect you again?"

"But I am not leaving you yet, Mrs. Asgar. I am merely going away for a

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day or two, and if you care to be bothered with me——”

Her eyes had a meaning for him now, and she was grown paler, he thought.

She put her hand on his arm.

“Arthur, you received a letter this morning. Pray forgive me for appearing deceitful—but I could not help perceiving that you were mindful not to let me see the writing on the envelope. Was the letter from Edward?”

“Yes, Mrs. Asgar.”

He simply could not lie to her.

“Where is he?”

“In London.”

“Is he ill?”

“No, no, Mrs. Asgar. He is quite well.”

“You are going to him?”

“Yes.”

“Has he sent for you?”

“I cannot say that——”

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"Ah, then there is something wrong!"

"Nothing whatever, I assure you, Mrs. Asgar! He seems lonely, and a little fretful. That—that is all."

"Might I read his letter?"

Haig flushed, and a painful smile came to his face.

"The letter is largely about myself," he said lamely; "Edward and I used to discuss different questions, you know——"

He felt utterly humiliated and ashamed.

"Dear friend," said Asgar's mother, "I am persuaded you would not deceive me to my hurt. But you might think you were doing me a kindness by—I will not say by concealment—let me say by your silence—when really it was no kindness but rather a deepening of my distress. In many things," she continued, "I could not possibly be of service to you. But surely I am a better judge than any one else can be in what con-

cerns my son's welfare. He has shut himself out from me, but I have not shut myself out from him, and in God's good Providence I believe in my heart—oh, in my whole being—that we shall yet understand each other, and that he will give me back his love. This has been my daily, almost my hourly prayer; it seems to me I have *lived* that prayer; and our dear Lord, who had an earthly mother and raised the widow's son from the dead, will not always suffer my boy to be as a stranger to me. Of late he has seemed to be drawing nearer to me: I cannot say in what way, but so it has seemed, and I may tell you—since you cannot know this—that a mother has a gift of understanding which she cannot understand herself. One night, in a dream, I put my hand on his head and said to him, 'The power of love shall restore us to each other, Edward.' I heard my own voice so distinctly

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that I think I must actually have spoken the words in my dream. . . . Why do you avoid looking at me, Arthur? I wish you would look at me," she said gently; for she was not so good as not to know the power of her goodness upon him.

"All this is breaking me down, Mrs. Asgar," he said in a low voice.

She was silent a moment, then took hold of both his hands.

"Arthur, now I will say to you what has been in my mind very—very strangely—for some time past. I confess I am unable to explain it, or to trace its origin to anything in my actual experience. I have been diligently recalling the events since Edward gave up the Brotherhood and secluded himself in the Deaf Tower—coming and going as if he could find no rest—but I find nothing tangible, nothing which I could positively name, to help me. The thought seems to

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have come to me out of darkness—unless, perhaps, it was by intuition. And I am at a loss how to express it, for it is in my heart rather than my head. But I will put it thus—and I beseech you, be honest with me, and totally disregard my personal feelings in the matter. . . . Arthur, should I be acting wisely . . . for my son's happiness . . . if I were to find Bessie and bring her to Drum—as *my equal?*"

Haig had no words. Knowing Mrs. Asgar, he knew how beautiful this thought of hers was, how humble too, and how impossible.

He could only bow his head: his silence was his answer.

"Dear friend," said Mrs. Asgar, "I understand now that you have been trying to bear my burden, with your bright ways and sunny words—always—to comfort me. Ah, should it be given to me to meet your



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mother presently, I shall tell her how kind and tender of heart you are. . . . Please bend your head; you are such a great tall man, and I am only a withered little woman."

Her hands went round his neck, and she folded them upon his hair while she kissed him. Her lips were very cold.

"It makes my old heart glad to touch youth and strength," she said. "And now you must go to Edward, and be as patient and gentle with him as you have been with me. And will you speak to him of his home and of me? But do not force my name upon him; it will be best merely to say, his mother is praying for him at the old home, and Rosa must be thinking of him, and I am taking care of Yvette, and perhaps I might feel a little lonely and anxious sometimes. . . . And will you tell him I am going to Hope-in-the-Valley? . . . I have

another intuition; though I hardly think that can be the right word," Mrs. Asgar added after a pause, and with an indescribable smile. "It is, that I shall be called away suddenly. I suppose this is why I so cling to my old-fashioned love for a happy ending . . . now more than ever . . ."

Haig took her in his arms. His laugh had something of a sob in it. She was smiling still, and seemed to like to rest her head on his breast.

"I am not running away from you, Mrs. Asgar. So please don't let any robber come in and collar my room. I am not tired of Drum, and I could never tire of you, and I am looking forward eagerly to that breathless ride on the Flying Dutchman!"

"God be your guide to my son," she murmured.

XXXIV

BUT Asgar had returned to Imberminster.
He was not many hours in the town.

"I shall not go to the clergy-house!" he said to himself. "I cannot go there!"

He called on Beilby, who was just leaving his lodgings to go to church to take Even-song. There was no personal talk: Asgar was to learn this night how unimportant his frets and cares were to his friends. The ecclesiastical machinery evidently was working very well without him.

"If you're going to stay a while," said Beilby, "have a look at this book. It's old —'s Life. It will be an eye-opener for you, and you'll want to pitch it on the fire. But don't; I borrowed it from the vicar—he

says it ought to be suppressed ; but the sly dog sniggered when he gave it to me."

" You don't mean the vicar of the Annunciation ? "

" No ; the vicar of Imberminster — *my* vicar. I wish I could stay to hear your comments. But you'll find it a wholesome antidote, all the same—a very good check on the vagaries of you whole-hog-or-none people ; he'll show you the folly of kicking your heels in the empyrean ! "

And as Asgar read, it was borne in upon him that one aspect at least of his doubt was not groundless. For he saw that the subject of the biography, although he had preached in the Church's pulpits and ministered at the Church's altars, had all the while been writing witty letters to his friends in which, in phrases of *sauve* and subtle insolence, he scoffed at the verities of the Christian faith and denied the divinity of Christ ; and yet it was written

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of him—"He was one of the purest men."

What then did purity mean? This man, this distinguished scholar, this refined pagan, had never been married: women apparently had been no more to him than the pages of a fine book—the pretty illuminated manuscripts of life. He had written charming letters to women, but they were all from the head: his letters to young men who had left college and become illustrious in the world were in just the same vein of passionless wisdom and worldly wisdom;—he had consistently declined, it seemed, to have anything to do with the failures who had passed through his hands. He had hundreds of times taken celebrations of the Holy Communion, believing it to be a meaningless and empty ceremony; and while declaring the Christ crucified and risen from the dead, he had regarded Him precisely from Renan's standpoint—:

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noble historic figure, pathetic—oh, yes, ineffably pathetic and sorrowful, a sublime, incomparable spirit, more than Dantesque in His solitary star-like remoteness, grandeur, repose—but no more than that: no more than a figure of unique and exceedingly interesting genius; and in his notes to intimate friends he was too impatiently contemptuous of the Resurrection and Ascension to give the idea a moment's serious consideration.

And this Platonist in the Christian Church was “one of the purest of men!”

What then was it that had kept him pure? Was his purity solely a matter of personal taste?—and did it end there, in the final argument?

For if the Christian ideal was but a dream, a glint of some mysterious physical essence in the air; if it was but an imaginative interest in a great and attractive genius, whose bones were even now lying white

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somewhere under the Syrian sky, how could it be binding on the conscience?

Nay, what was conscience; what did it mean? Could it not be physically located and cut out, like a disease? or was it a supersensitive and morbid regard for conventional usage?

Asgar quitted Beilby's lodgings, but he did not go to the Church of the Annunciation. "I shall give the clergy-house a wide berth!" he said to himself. He kept repeating this: it would be a useless humiliation to go there. "They can't help me!"

But he could not remain in the streets: Strauss or Gurney might chance upon him; and in order to avoid being seen he called at a house in a fashionable square, and not until he was admitted did he hit on the excuse of congratulating Miss Houghton on her approaching marriage to the Reverend Theobald Sinclair. It was Asgar's experi-

[REDACTED]

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ence that the clergy were at least men of taste and culture, as a rule; but he had a marked antipathy to Sinclair.

Miss Houghton was plain, and a good deal older than the bridegroom, but she was an heiress, and Sinclair considered himself extremely lucky. His relatives were all "nobodies": they were not coming to the wedding, which was going to be a very grand affair; and it was tacitly understood that henceforth his people should be kept in the background.

Asgar was shown into the drawing-room. Miss Houghton was there, dressed for dinner: a large, florid, coarse-looking lady. She was giving the reporter of a local paper information about her wedding. Asgar, hearing talk of gowns and presents, felt he ought not to stay, but the bride asked him to be seated and went on with her recital of personal finery. It pleased her apparently

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that Asgar should hear what was being done.

"Mr. Sinclair is with papa," she said; "he promised to come and help me."

She rang the bell, and told the servant to tell Mr. Sinclair he was wanted in the drawing-room.

"He has such good taste in these matters," she said.

The room was oppressively splendid. At one end was a pink-shaded lamp, where the bride sat with the reporter. The light was dim, but Asgar could see that she had been "making up."

Sinclair came with prompt obedience, and gave Asgar a couple of soft, damp fingers. Then he turned to the gentleman of the press and nodded condescendingly.

"This is the reporter," said Miss Houghton, giggling girlishly. "He wants a full description of my wedding-dress, and I

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can't give it to him properly. It ought to have been written out by the dressmaker."

"You write shorthand, I suppose?" said Sinclair, putting his hands behind his back and assuming a business-like air; he was evidently proud to turn himself into a man-milliner. "Take it down as I dictate. 'The bride looked exceedingly charming'—"

"O Theo," the bride giggled.

"Have you got that?"

"Yes," said the reporter, apparently half asleep. "'The bride looked exceedingly charming'—"

'—'in a costly gown'—'

"Say dress, Theo."

"My dear, gown is the fashionable name just now—'of richest duchesse satin,—final 'e' in duchesse, you know—'trimmed with fine old Mechlin lace.' And so on: the reverend gentleman knew all about it.

"What will your mother wear?" the re-

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porter said to the bride ; and Sinclair told him down to the smallest detail, not forgetting the gay old lady's bronze shoes—"with bronze silk rosettes," said her prospective son-in-law

Asgar listened in a kind of suffocation
And this was what the priesthood of the
Holy Catholic Church had come to !

" And the bridegroom's mother," said the reporter. " What will she wear ? "

" Oh, you needn't say anything about that," said Sinclair ; and the reporter gazed vacantly at a huge painting of the Flood, with men and women drowning in graceful postures. " 'Full choral service, and the Archdeacon of Frant will officiate, assisted by the vicar of Imberminster.' "

" Say there were special floral decorations," said the bride.

" Oh yes, the church beautifully decorated for the occasion," chimed in the bridegroom.

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"And the honeymoon?" asked the reporter.

"We are going to Belgium," said the bride.

"Say the honeymoon will be spent on the Continent," said the bridegroom. "Make a good report of it, you know; if you do we shall want a lot of papers. You've got the bridesmaids' names and their dresses? I'm giving them their bouquets and a gold bangle to each."

Sinclair glanced at Miss Houghton as he said this, and both laughed self-consciously.

"I wish you would say that Miss Dorothy Slingsby is a grand-daughter of Lord Wivelsfield; her mother will like to see that in print—of course you know she is the Honourable Mrs. Slingsby."

A question was asked about the bride's going-away dress, and Sinclair babbled out details.

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"I'm not sure about the hymns," said the little snob. "We must have, 'O perfect love ! all human thought transcending,' and that other thing they sang at the Duke and Duchess of York's wedding."

The reporter took his leave.

"Wait till you get married, old chap," said Sinclair.

And Asgar, declining a not very pressing invitation to stay to dinner, presently bade Miss Houghton good-night. As Sinclair was letting him out, Miss Houghton called, "Theo!" They looked down the hall : she was standing at the foot of the stair.

"Isn't she handsome?" Sinclair whispered, "with the light on her magnificent head! I'm the luckiest fellow in Imberminster. Her father has settled £20,000 on her;" and to himself as he shut the door, "Poor Asgar is fearfully envious."

XXXV

HALF-AN-HOUR later, the evening being still young, Asgar was wandering in the poorest quarter of the town. He had often been here with the Sisters of the Annunciation : he had walked behind them like a servant carrying their heavy baskets of provisions for the poor. The recollection softened him somewhat ; and he forgot that wedding chatter.

He looked about on old bookstalls, drabble-tailed dusty collections which appeared to interest him, though he would not have read a book he saw. The high-smelling fried fish shops ; the greengrocery shops ; the drapery shops—he seemed to be interested in everything, and especially in the people, the joyless

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women and children, the brutalised men.
Did they wish to remain here? Were they
happy here? One became deadened, perhaps,
to one's debasement.

In this terrible street there was a church.
The door was open, and Asgar went in. He
knelt to the Host, and crossed himself.

It was a church of the Roman Communion :
a gloomy little place, in keeping with its
surroundings. The sanctuary light burned
dim in a kind of mist ; the altar, the stations
of the cross, the pulpit, all looked obscure,
far away ; the evening was come—was it
also the Evening of the Church, the dusk
of the Christian faith?

Asgar felt that he was in a sepulchre and
that Christ lay somewhere near—dead.

That overwhelming idea—that appalling
negation—had possessed him of late—a dead
Christ in a dead Church!

Had the stone never been rolled away?

[REDACTED]

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And if not, then wherefore these terrors
of the soul?

Asgar moved along at the door end of the nave. Here it was very dark. He saw a figure kneeling beside a pillar, a figure of sighs, all made up, it seemed, of utter earth-sorrow and weariness and wretchedness: simply a little old woman kneeling in the corner of a seat in the dark.

He stood behind her. She did not raise her head—a dirty old shawl on her rounded shoulders, her gray hair spreading out from a tattered bonnet, her grimy feeble hands folded in prayer.

She moved, beating her breast; and Asgar fell on his knees behind her.

And in that moment he had a vision of life in which there was no God.

And yet he prayed—tried to pray—if not with his lips, with his heart.

For he could not bear this vision!



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If it were true, he was all wrong : he was scaring himself with phantoms ; missing happiness. . . .

The old woman began again to beat her breast : Asgar heard the faint rattle of beads. She did not lift her eyes : she had hidden herself here in the darkest corner she could find.

On the wall hung a crucifix, a white Man of Sorrows smeared with blood—blood on the hands and feet, blood streaming over the anguished face from the crown of thorns.

The Crown of Thorns!—*that* must mean something ; that could not be a dream ; that at least was true. One might sin—sin—sin ; deluge oneself with sin. But Calvary could not be obliterated ; He was hanging there still ; His voice still rang out over the world! . . .



XXXVI

AN hour after this Asgar hesitated outside
a little country station.

A couple of empty milk-cans were rolled
down and lifted into a cart; a girl stood
looking on, in smiling appeal, a basket on
her arm.

“Come on!” cried the youth in the milk-
cart.

She said, “'Z'f I didn't know you would;”
and he hauled her into the cart in a big
rough way, to show her how strong he
was.

She cried, “My stars! 'Z'f I wasn't
nearly over the other side!”—and gave a
scream-laugh.

The young men loitering about laughed
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too, and one winked, and one crammed his hands deep into his trousers' pockets, as the milk-cart rattled away, a sheep-dog barking behind.

On the opposite side of the road, where a muddy-eyed lamp peered into the gloom, a countryman's head made a Rembrandt picture on the inn wall.

Asgar followed in the noisy wake of the milk-cart, westward, where the night seemed darkest.

In a few minutes he was past the last of the village lights.

As he crossed a common, in the thundering legion of despair, he had extravagant impressions of things—saw a lake that was limitless; modest hills that were mountainous ramparts on the horizon; an enigma of trees; gray-white chalk roads like creatures of frail breath crawling in dumb dishonour on the earth. The common, when he looked



back upon it from higher ground, resembled a huge splash of mud, the dead eye of the lake in the midst of it.

The night was on the knees of the gods of stillness and silence: the air had a virginal sweetness, an intimate yet elusive feeling, like abstract love.

It was not in Asgar's mood to keep to the high-road. His desire was towards inaccessible places.

He came upon a man in a blue-black smock standing by a stile, and cried out to him in a loud voice, "Good-night!" The man, in bovine amazement, moved on one side, making no answer; and Asgar went across a field.

On a sudden, in a revelation of the common brotherhood (which enduring might have saved him), he turned; but the wayfarer was gone from the stile.

Ah! he too must have his floundering

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brief grasp amid the Inevitablenesses!—birth and baptism, the parson's puzzles out of the book, love and marriage, the drying-up of the sap of youth, age, death, burial; others gone before—father, mother, wife and children perhaps, grandfather and grandmother; the wind sighing over them, the sun of summer, the frost and snow and storms of winter—the same old inexplicable story; always the same: a piece of gigantic remorseless machinery, none comprehending—then rest, and the tolling of the bell: the new generation merry-making on the green, heedless of the insatiable hunger of the ever-devouring machine—What could *he* make of it, this maddening moment called life?

A path trailed through the field, but Asgar scarce kept to it. His ego sought the dust.

He did not think of the flowers waiting in a perfect reasonableness and submission at his feet till the sun should come forth

[REDACTED]

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again from his chambers in the east—did not think of this : hardly thought at all.

Yet he was in a kind of intoxication of bodily health. His limbs swung free. He went on and on, across meadows and fallow land, and felt nothing of physical weariness.

But he did not now walk steadily ; it seemed to him there must be a tempest of wind, or that the earth had grown uncertain. He fancied he heard in the distance the rattling wheels of the milk-cart, the mirth of youth and maiden, the voice of the sheep-dog.

And then a great silence fell on outward things. The clouds became soul-failures wearied into insensibility at the gates of heaven ; the slumberous night was full of indistinguishable wailing cries. All things appeared to have been created from a tear.

He came to a hedge, and pressing through it, leapt out on to a steep road.

He stood awhile, looking at the clouds : then let himself go.

Time was as nothing to him : he had lost the sense of it. Since he had left the remote country station, at which he had alighted by chance (not heeding so much as the name of it), an hour might have passed, or two, or three. He was in the antechamber of eternity—the blankness they named eternity—and the hours had no meaning for him.

Well ! he would soon be done with it ; he was here to make an end of it once for all ; and when the bullet should churn through his brain——

What then ?

The thought was swifter than the lightning's flash : it swished upon him, and was gone, and—"No more of *that*," he said to himself.

He was feeling out of the world before he had put himself out of it.

[REDACTED]

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And other thoughts were born to him, created irresistibly from the womb of the soul, and instantly strangled at their birth.

He would not think: for long periods, could not. The moon suggested her presence: this pale white shine could not be starlight; it was sadder, nearer than the light of the stars.

XXXVII

HE was presently in a village—a dead village in a dead land; ghosts of houses, ghosts of men and women and children in the houses; only this old church, its Norman tower black with ivy, seemed real; —but it stood amid a feast of skeletons, its walls were buttressed with the bones of men; what was that strange, awful odour in its hallowed spaces?

And this white cross out here had a weeping willow over it; and this pompous tomb, towering high, a marble angel strewing flowers upon it, could do no more than tell the eternities of some great little creature inconceivable now save as a shadow.

Asgar gripped the revolver in his pocket.

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But he did not take it out, and let go his hold.

That stout-hearted church tower bore witness against him, offering its silent strong protest. And there was an enervating influence in the very placidity of the night: the senses were lulled by it, the will threatened with enfeeblement.

His weakness peeped out at him, pallid, supplicating, the sincerest thing in his being.

He turned up his coat collar, buttoned it across his throat, and hurried from the village. An hour, striking in the church tower, boomed upon him like a thunder-clap; yet of the hour he knew nothing.

Exhaustion was setting in, but he would not confess to it. He might be footsore: there might be blood on his feet even; he had no concern with these trifles.

But he stopped, looked down at his feet,

[REDACTED]

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then held his hand to his eyes. This was a concession, and plunging forward again, he lost his balance and reeled on to a bank. The bank was dry, and as he fell so he lay.

If one having compassion had come, taking him by the hand, he would not have been grateful, but perhaps resigned.

For a man may shiver on the brink, meaning to go over into the deeps all the same. It is not easy to die after you have held long converse with Death. The way is through fire, through the flame that burns and destroys thought, and if the fire has spent itself and the thing be not yet done, thought rises from its ashes and the soul pants for another sunrise.

And Asgar was to make this his last night. The fire might be burning low, but enough was left to supply the impelling force.

[REDACTED]

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And now a new craving writhed in his spiritual chaos—he would finish his course in a distinguished reticence, a complete and unsullied anonymity. There would be credit, self-respect, distinction in that: a man should feel unique, sublime, going hence thus.

In his fresh perversion he raised his head and stared out ravenous upon the darkness: saw trunks of trees, a road, a star in the gray-black confusion over the hills.

He took out a bundle of letters, purposing to destroy them. Where he was he knew not, cared not; nor did he feel any concernment as to how or by whom he should be put underground; all that was so unimportant, so childish!

It sufficed that he should get out of the world unknown, his fate for ever a mystery to his friends.

Would they not be looking continually for his return? And was not the idea of immortality there, the germ of it, the sign of immortality? You lived in the memory of the living—was not that enough? was not that *all*?

The rest unthinkable!

What else could there be? The perpetuation of a name! What more could there be for the best, for the worst: for Sylvester—for Gurney—Asgar?

He hoisted himself suddenly on his elbows; saw the trees clearer; thrust the letters back into his pocket.

He had been dreaming of the impossible. A man could not perish by the roadside like a dog!

The idea of nothingness overshadowed him, appalled him: it was become an omnipresence, filled the air, his blood, his whole being; he could not bear to contemplate him-

[REDACTED]

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self as though he had never been—that was the last degradation, the ghastliest mockery of the “I”—the “I am I”—of all human aspiration and human endeavour.

For if annihilation were the goal, what of the things by the way?

He snatched an envelope from his pocket and wrote on it in pencil :

“I am Edward Asgar—I wish to be buried in the churchyard of Drum.”



XXXVIII

THIS appeased him somewhat. His outlook now was less blurred, and he perceived the beauty of a white radiance on the curves and pinnacles of clouds. The quietude impressed him with a sense of companionship.

But presently he felt that he was about to swoon, and falling on his side on the bank, rested a long while in a barely conscious state.

The third hour of the morning was come when he got up and once more took the road that led Nowhither.

He walked for another hour: yet not so rapidly now.

The dawn touched the eastern horizon. A stupendous creative power seemed to

[REDACTED]

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move, making the earth quiver. A cock crew from a farmyard: a coldish breeze blew from the uplands. It was going to be a fine morning apparently.

Asgar trudged on almost unconsciously. The road guided him to the top of a hill, and thence he beheld, as in a vision of sleeping hours, a vast Forest lying vague and enchanted in the spirituality of the dawn.

The hills were singing—were they not? And a pageant of colour had begun: it would sweep up and up from the place where light dwelt, and then the sun would roll into the sky and break down the last vestige of his intention.

He took out his revolver, and holding it in his hand, moved slowly down the hill towards the Forest.

It seemed to him that awful eyes were regarding him at this moment; and on a

sudden he slipped the weapon into his pocket.

He clenched his hands and walked faster. The air grew keener : the vital breath of it strengthened his resolve. It could not be otherwise! There was no going back now.

In a little chalk basin on the slope of the hill, full of clear water, framed with bright green grass, he caught the reflection of his face. It was the face, he bade himself believe, of a man who had made up his mind.

The Forest stretching away at his feet was nebulously familiar to him : a thing he had seen yet could not recall ; it was reminiscent of his childhood and of beautiful brave things forgotten.

He got at last to the valley between the hills and the Forest. Some cottages were here, but he shunned them : hardly, indeed, perceived them. No smoke came from

[REDACTED]

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their chimneys ; their blinds were drawn down. As he glided past he noticed a cactus at a window, and a child's hoop at a door.

So the children would come forth laughing soon ! He said to himself : " I would fight for existence—with wild beasts even—if I were the last man in the world ! "

He was envious of the little children, and in the same instant loved and pitied them. They might never know ; their eyes might never be opened ; the night might never enter into their souls.

God might be in His heaven after all !

He had a conception of the swirling of the earth through space : farther and farther, into endless vacuity. Oh, the intolerable, unfathomable mystery of it !

He got over a paling and went in among stunted trees and rank undergrowths. This was to be the place.

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The day was fast coming, and he could not longer temporise, nibbling at the garments of death. This thing could not be done in the glare of the sun. That water on the hill-slope had told the truth: his will was set.

He came to a tree with low-hanging branches, and throwing himself down, crept in out of sight.

It was a lair of decay: even the few blades of grass had a deathly pallor; it was out of the way of passers-by when they should go to their labour and their sorrow till the evening.

He lay on his side, his face close to the earth. It smelled strangely, yet familiarly, like hyssop; it was very bitter and very sweet: seemed to be speaking to him, calling him; it expressed all weariness and the crowning rest.

The sun would come forth and make the

[REDACTED]

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earth alive. But that was the sport of the sun! and a man should have the courage to say when he had had enough of the game.

But one thought of this—and what could be the meaning of the thinking of it? . . .

And would they find him—when it was all over?

Strangers perhaps. All men were awed by the sight of the dead—and that was wonderful too!

He fell on his back, and stretched himself out, like a man composed in his cerements. He did nothing yet ; it seemed to him while in this posture that his heart was stopping ; he was seized with unconsciousness of his surroundings—the branches over him became towering arches in eternity : he imagined himself in the air, the world melting in vapour beneath him.

He raised himself on his elbows and peered out from under the branches.



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The day was nearly come : a rosy tint was on the greensward beyond his hiding-place ; farther away slim-trunked saplings were outlined dark and clear upon an illimitable sea of pale yellow light.

He fancied he heard a crackling sound, as of some one approaching. He held his finger on the trigger of the revolver : he would do it now—at once—so that, should he fail to do it perfectly, he might be cared for.

A man could not lie in his blood, hanging on to a thread of life, helpless !

But he did not do it : he had *thought*. He lay listening, his finger still on the trigger.

The obscure sounds were repeated. A shadow was born upon the earth. Then a greater light, the birth of Day—and in the light a female form.

Was she come forth to him out of the dawn ?

He gazed on her from the jaws of death.

[REDACTED]

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This surely was the miracle of miracles.
His heart began to sing a new song.

The figure seemed to dance in the morning
splendour, then passed before the saplings,
and was gone.

And now this bed of decay was become
a suffocation to him. He thrust the revolver
in his pocket, and crawled out into the purer
air.

The figure was moving away. In a moment
she would vanish among the undergrowths.

“Bessie!” he called.

She turned at the name on the instant,
and stood with eyes of wonder till he went
up to her.

XXXIX

BUT her wonderment was speedily veiled, for she said to herself (at the sight of his disorganised manhood), "I must pretend not to suspect, lest he be humiliated before me :" of her tender, gracious love for him she made this resolve, meaning to abide by it to the end, even should he seek to make her understand the sorry business he had been about.

And so she hid her pain, and from the deep wells of her affection drew up pleasantness to her bright eyes, that else would have been brighter still with tears ; and pressed his hand in the frank sincerity of friendship, and began to laugh—concealing the slight hysteria of her mirth—

[REDACTED]

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as she set right her straw hat, one of the blue ribbons having got doubled up in her hair.

"Don't you think I am an early riser?" she said with gaiety. "And you too! But you were always so fond of long walks. I am staying with Mrs. Leyton, my mother's old friend," Bessie added quickly; "the house is just over there; you would be able to see it if there were no trees—this is Hope-in-the-Valley, of course you know—and oh, what a beautiful fresh morning! But I must not stand talking, because last night I promised Mrs. Leyton that if I awoke early enough to go and see the poor old woman in the Forest, before any one was about, I should be back in time for breakfast. Mrs. Leyton does so like to have a cup of tea in bed, and I always take her one. She says she will never let me leave her; but my mother came to see us

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yesterday, and I shall be going home in a day or two."

"The old woman in the Forest," Asgar said. "You mean the woman they call a witch?"

"Yes, though I don't believe in witchcraft. But they believe in it hereabouts—oh, terribly. And she is quite alone, and it is said she is dying. Her daughter has forsaken her also, and it is thought may have made away with herself, fearing she is bewitched; so the poor old creature is entirely deserted, and I am going to see if I can do anything for her."

Bessie raised her tweed mantle and showed him a little paper parcel under her arm.

"I am taking her some food, but we are all so stricken and horrified about her, I hardly knew what to make. They say she never eats at all, and is only kept alive by

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the evil spirit in her, which won't leave her till she touches some one who does not possess an evil spirit, and then it will enter into that person. This is why her daughter was afraid to remain. Mr. Asgar," Bessie cried, "look there; what a wonderful sunrise! It is the first I have seen at Hope-in-the-Valley, I am ashamed to say."

"We have seen it together, Bessie."

"Yes—I am glad."

And he said humbly: "May I go with you into the Forest?"

"Oh yes! I would have asked you, but I thought perhaps you might be wishing to get back to Drum."

"Have you been to Drum lately?" he inquired absently.

"Not for some days. But Mrs. Asgar has been to Hope-in-the-Valley; she came to see me, and was very good and kind, as indeed she always is. This is the way."

She led him to a gate, and opened it to let him go out on to the road. The power was in her hands now, and she wielded it graciously in the guise of a sweet submissiveness, that broke him in pieces.

Of the beauty of the morning, the fair sights of earth and sky, he saw little or nothing distinctly: he was absorbed in this diviner presence which had come to him at the twelfth hour of his wretchedness, bringing him back to the light and to a sane desire of life.

She was the embodiment of reasonable existence.

"Are you tired, Mr. Asgar?"

"I had lost myself," he said; "and you have found me."

He made a beseeching movement of his hand, as if to take hers; but she did not perceive his intention.

[REDACTED]

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"We go," said she, "this way. I have seen the cottage, and shall recognise it again."

He asked if he might carry her parcel, but, "Oh no, thank you," she replied, farther telling him it was not at all heavy.

"Let us take this path," she added, "or we shall trample on the bluebells. I have not been in the Forest before so early in the morning. Oh, those birds; how everything seems to be welcoming the sun! The brooks don't make such pretty cries in the night-time. And the grass, too—one could almost believe it was smiling. I wonder," said Bessie, "what effect it would have on the dreadful sadness and wrongness of the world if everybody was made to get up on a morning like this to see the sun rise!"

"They might forget by nightfall," Asgar said.

L [REDACTED]

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"But they would be ashamed!" Bessie cried.

He touched her arm: she neither encouraged nor discouraged him; simply made believe not to notice.

XL

THEY came at length to the witch's cottage; it was like a big summer-house in a tangled garden; no other habitation was visible.

"Will you wait here?" Bessie said. "It will be better for me to go in alone—at first. If there is any danger I will call."

"You are not afraid?"

"Not at all. I am sure this is the place. The door is ajar."

He stood at the gate and watched her go up through the garden. At the cottage, she glanced round to see if he was still there. Then, having tapped on the door, she pushed it open and went in.



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For some minutes Asgar heard no sound save the songs of birds and the cooing of wood-pigeons. A kingfisher made a green flash in the golden air: the great trees over the slopes wore a humanised aspect; the sky seemed very high and grand, and an amazed magnificence of energy and intention vibrated in its boundless vault, as though it were a gigantic bell ringing forth the glory of day.

Asgar, growing anxious, moved up silently to the door and looked in.

An old woman, indescribably ugly, lay on a bed in a pitiful bare room, and Bessie (who had taken off her hat) sat on a chair close to the bed.

But white roses at the window were what Asgar had seen first. Bessie was leaning forward, and the old woman, a marvellous look in her eyes, raised her hand—it was yellow, like the hand of a fever-stricken

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corpse—and let it rest a moment on the girl's head.

As Asgar thrust back the door and entered the room, the hand fell on to the mattress, and the old woman's mouth opened. It was black and horrible; but the face was less repulsive now. She lay motionless, and Bessie cried out to her, "I am your friend—I am your friend!" and put back the gray hair from her brow.

"She is dead," Asgar said. "Come away!"

"Oh, are you sure?" Bessie whispered. "It was so sudden. She said to me, 'Dearie—' and then, when she rested her hand on my head—I bent down, knowing she wished to touch me——"

"She is dead!" Asgar said. "Yes—yes. See."

He lifted the yellow hand.

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"How horrible death is!" he exclaimed with loathing.

He opened the window, and the morning breeze blew in the scent of roses and the remote and more subtle fragrance of the Forest.

He stood by the window a moment, fearful of letting his gaze wander again to the bed.

When he turned, he saw that Bessie had tied her handkerchief round the head, and was trying to close the dead eyes. The sight of her pity put him in a kind of panic.

"Come away!—come away!" he cried.

He strode to the door, but she did not follow him, and he went back and caught hold of her.

"For God's sake don't touch her!" he said. "We can do nothing!" He pulled her away from the bed, and snatched up

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her hat. "You can put it on outside.
Come away!—come away!"

And then she turned to him, quite calmly, and said, "I am not afraid of death," and looked at him with steadfast eyes.

"We must return, and send some one," she added; and in a great self-possession she tied the blue ribbons of her hat under her chin.

But she was very pale as she went out with him into the garden.

"She put her hand on my head."

"Yes—I saw—it was horrible!"

"Oh no! I am so thankful. . . . And after that it was like going to sleep. She tried to speak; I wish she had blessed me, but I am sure it was in her heart. Oh, how grateful I feel—I scarcely know why. I think if she had lived a little longer, she would have asked me to pray." . . .

"You came to her out of the light, out

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of the dawn," said Asgar. "To her—and
to me——"

And as they went through the Forest
to Hope-in-the-Valley, he secretly took the
revolver from his pocket, and let it fall
behind him on to the grass.

XLI

(*Six years have passed: Haig writes to his sister from Drum.*) . . . My dear girl, you are no prophetess ; Asgar's marriage has not been the disastrous experiment you imagine. I can't say it strikes me as being a remarkable success. But it is quite the most sensible thing he has done, and evidently he is as happy as he wishes to be, which is a queer saying I shall try to explain.

For Asgar is ceasing to be astonished at himself ; in fact, he is severely drilling himself in a sort of sublimated Philistinism, and is content, apparently, to be among the illustrious obscure.

He has still that tired look which so troubled his sweet mother (who is in

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heaven), but it becomes him so well, I fancy it must be natural, or at any rate, naturally unnatural—which, perhaps, is not exactly the same thing.

You have spoken—and worse, written—scornfully of the “vanishing girl,” as you are pleased to call her. Don’t do it again, my girl. She is a good woman, and makes Asgar a good wife. As far as a man may hope to be, I regard Asgar as being mated to a perfect woman, and of course that is ever so much more than he deserves. If I get presumptuous enough to shout her praises before I have done, I shall do it, whatever you may say, most critical of sisters.

The first thing I noticed, on driving through the park, was that Asgar had pulled down the Deaf Tower. I tell you, he is a reformed character with a vengeance! Mr. Tarpath is dead, and Asgar has appointed a High Church rector—his name being

[REDACTED]

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Gurney—whose goings-on make one half of the people hereabouts smile, and the other half have visions of the Scarlet Woman.

But Asgar is not a smiling man. He has become fearfully sedate, not to say solemn. Well, I suppose he couldn't help himself; he is a born extremist. If he hadn't been a thoroughly good fellow at heart, he wouldn't have found himself where he is now. And I believe he has made his final decision, and that even were his wife to die to-morrow, he would go on pretty much in the same way.

Also I believe he has modelled his course in accordance with his mother's conception of duty—only she would have added a little more sunniness of temper, God bless her! (which looks like profanity).

And if I seem to sneer at him, that is because I know him so well, and I have pitched into him a lot more with my tongue

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(in those old days for ever gone, thank goodness!) than I am likely to do with my pen.

I am convinced that what really ailed Asgar in the tempestuous lurid days after he broke from the Brotherhood was fright about his soul. He suffered from spiritual scare—spiritual panic; and I suspect this malady is a good deal commoner than some of us think; only it is kept out of sight, people are ashamed of it (especially men), and the doctors regard it as a disorder of the nerves, and recommend electricity and change of air. Perhaps they are right; I'm an ordinary man, as you may possibly be aware, and I don't want to tackle anybody's soul. And upon my word, Asgar did kick up a fearful fuss about his; though I can see more clearly now how he came to mix up the Perfect Woman with it, and how Father Strauss got hold of him for a while.

If the idealist gives up his ideal in the sky, he is certain to seek an ideal on the earth. So it was with Asgar. And then he got her in his arms (which was the proper place for her to be), and this more blessed reality has cured him as far as he can be cured.

Radically curable, however, he is not. The leopard does not change his spots nor Asgar his I—or should it be his Me? He is the same Asgar, with a difference. Or rather, with differences.

But I am not pretending to make you anything like a full-sized picture of the reformed Asgar. I couldn't do it if I were to try.

He still baffles me: I still have to hunt round him, and peer, and search, and wonder, and there is always something left in obscurity. It peeps out sometimes, and I glare and glare; but it eludes me. I suppose it is so

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with all of us ; I don't entirely understand
you even !

And this brings me to such an awful thought—not about you, but about myself and everybody—(I'll have a pipe on it).

Luke, the melancholy lover I told you of, is out there in the garden ; he's the husband of a great fat wife and has three children ; so much for *his* Miss Nonsuch !—and he does just as he likes at Drum, and Asgar has built him a fine house.

Asgar, you will have guessed, is grown very religious. Personally I like that straightforward kind of religion that doesn't make a man shiver in his shoes whenever he says damn. Asgar never says it now. His religion is of the severest stamp ; with the help of Gurney, he is grounding himself in the ways of traditional Anglican high-class austerity.

Some women would have given him cause

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for prolonged martyrdom, in which I hardly think he would have been more attractive.

His wife gives him no such opportunity. She is as clever as she is gentle and gracious, and knows when and how to be blind and silent.

Asgar's hair is almost white, and he has grown a beard, and that is getting gray also. He reminds me rather of the portraits of Charles I. He is very pale and much thinner than when I last saw him. His spiritualised appearance is touching, and somewhat noble, when I consider how it has been brought about.

It is out of the question to talk to him as I used to ; he couldn't bear it. He has so disciplined and repressed himself that not much of the old personal charm remains. What is left of it he struggles to suppress —not from churlishness : his courtesy is a finer flower than ever, with consideration for

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others, and particularly for the poor, added ; but he seems afraid of making himself personally too attractive.

It is part of his system to keep himself down.

He doesn't preach. But that no doubt is because he is a gentleman. And he is kept human by living in the radiant humanity of his wife's atmosphere.

I know not from what extreme of self-renunciation she has saved him. Had she been a fashionable "lady," existence under the same roof would have been impossible to them. They would have met probably once a year, and then she would have snubbed him, and he would have prayed for her and gone farther "out of the world."

He fancies, as I judge, he is out of it and done with it already. If this is one of his illusions, I would on no account try to dispel it. At least it is harmless. He reverences

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his wife, whom his mother also loved very tenderly. I think of the charming old lady's dream of a "happy ending," and that she should have lived to see it fulfilled, seems to make things more complete at Drum.

He does not often speak of his mother. She is buried in a sunny corner under the chancel wall of the old church: I found Asgar there one day, trowel in hand, on his knees attending to her grave. He stood up, and I hardly liked to look at him. He was silent a while; then he took my arm and said, "Haig, this makes me hear the singing on the hills."

They have no children.

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